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MIGRANT INTEGRATION IN SMALL COMMUNITIES

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Social relations, individual attitudes and migrant integration experiences in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas in the Netherlands

Country Reports on policy outcomes

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REPORT

https://whole-comm.eu

Executive summary

This report looks at post-2014 migrants' reciprocal attitudes, social relations, and integration experiences in four small and medium-sized towns and rural areas in the Netherlands. Primarily based on interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation conducted in the four selected municipalities, the report explores which factors facilitate or hinder positive encounters and shape attitudes, interactions and lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion in specific local contexts.

Factors facilitating positive experiences of settlement and integration of post-2014 newcomers include a larger size of the locality, a higher level of population diversity and a more central location and connectivity of a locality. Besides the spatial dimension, governmental approaches that allow learning the language first and/or consider a person's educational/professional background with regards to future employment as well as permanent and accessible local support structures contribute to a positive integration experience. Here, neighbourhood houses and other non-public organizations play a particularly important role by providing opportunities for encounters with long-term residents, thereby facilitating interaction and exchange. Furthermore, a positive attitude towards newcomers among residents, political leadership, and high prioritization of integration on the local political agenda influence people's integration processes positively.

Factors that lead to more negative experiences of settlement and integration for post-2014 migrants include the smaller size of a locality, a largely homogeneous population, and a peripheral location of localities. With regards to governance-related factors, migrants experienced the national dispersal mechanism as particularly negative because it implied for many to lose valuable time in reception centers while waiting for the completion of their lengthy asylum procedure. Moreover, difficulties of finding a job corresponding to migrants' educational and professional background as well as (local) governmental pressure of taking low-paid jobs or unpaid volunteering/internship positions often resulted in frustration, perceived lack of recognition and experiences of exclusion. Other factors leading to a more negative experience include irregular and fragile local support structures and absence of spaces that provide opportunities for encounters with local residents. We further find that awareness of negative discourses and images surrounding migrants/refugees, a negative attitude towards newcomers among residents, lack of political leadership, and/or limited attention for integration on the local political agenda influence people's integration processes negatively.

Some of the key **similarities** that we found across localities are insecurities regarding communicating and interacting with Dutch residents – due to missing language skills and perceived cultural differences – as well as the ease and support effect of having interactions with people from one's own community. Another factor that was mentioned across localities in similar ways was the role of discourses and images about migration and (Muslim) migrants/refugees and experiences of encounter where newcomers either experienced kindness/openness or hostility/stereotypes towards them.

We also found some **differences** between localities, especially regarding welcoming/positive attitudes towards migrants. Our respondents linked such attitudes to the size of a locality, its degree of homogeneity or diversification, and the organizational landscape in a locality.

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The researcher would like to thank all respondents who took the time to share their valuable perspectives and personals stories with her – without them it would have not been possible to write this report.

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تود الباحثة ان تشكر جميع المشاركين، الذين شاركوها وجهات نظرهم القيمة وقصصهم الشخصية معها، ولولاهم لماكان من الممكن كتابة التقرير.

محقق صمیمانه از همه کسانی که وقت گذاشتن، دیدگاه های ارزشمند و داستان های شخصی خود را با او در میان گذاشتند سپاس و قدردانی میکند.
بدون آنها نوشتن این گزارش امکان پذیر نبود.

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1. Introduction

In the wake of the 2015 so-called "refugee crisis" small and medium-sized towns and rural areas (SMsTRAs) have been playing an increasing role in accommodating humanitarian migrants. The arrival of asylum-seeking migrants in the EU has peaked after 2014 and EU countries have struggled to re-organise and manage the reception of humanitarian migrants. The lack of immediately available reception facilities in cities, coupled with the dispersion policies implemented by states to ensure an "equal" distribution of asylum seekers across their national territories, has led to the increased involvement of small and medium-sized towns and rural areas in the reception of people seeking refuge (Flamant *et al.* 2020). Even though immigrant integration in cities has been in the focus of research since decades now, we know relatively little about smaller towns and rural areas, localities that often have no or little prior experiences with migration. Research has shown, that "the experiences that new arrivals face in the first phase of their reception and accommodation, and the relationships they build in their neighbourhoods and host cities have a long-term effect on their later lives and play a significant role in the way their impressions, aspirations and motivations develop along the way of their integration trajectories" (Seethaler-Wari 2018).

We need to know more about which factors facilitate and which hinder positive experiences when migrants (mainly arrived after 2014) settle in these small and medium-sized towns and rural areas. The objective of the country report is thus to understand which role specific local contexts (or "local refugee integration opportunity structures"), within the same country, can play in shaping individual attitudes, social relations, and consequently migrant integration experiences in SMsTRAs. We define local (refugee) integration opportunity structures, as "sets of resources, arrangements and pathways that can facilitate or block integration" (Phillimore 2020). Among the contextual factors that determine the local opportunity structure we identify, following and adapting Phillimore (2020), four dimensions:

a. The **social dimension**, highlighting individual (e.g., age, gender, country of origin, class, religion) and group level factors (e.g., presence or absence of support networks, civil society organisations).

b. The **ideational-political dimension**, which includes a set of factors connected to discourse, such as media information, political ideology of leaders and the local community, and political mobilizations pro- and anti-migrants.

c. Factors connected to **governance**, including the impact of housing, labour market, and specific immigrant integration policies and practices, and their implementation at the local level.

d. The **spatial dimension**, focusing on the specificity of SMsTRAs compared to cities but also on local socio-economic determinants and on spatial proximity/segregation.

Aim of this report is to identify in the localities analysed in the Netherlands which factors are more relevant in shaping attitudes, interactions between long-term residents and post-2014 migrants, and migrants' experiences of inclusion/exclusion.

We are currently facing a new refugee crisis triggered by the Ukraine war. Even though the focus of the Whole-COMM project is on post-2014 migrants' integration in SMsTRAs, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees begs the question: what can we learn from experiences of inclusion/exclusion in SMsTRAs of refugees who arrived in a different "crisis" period? Are SMsTRAs involved in the reception of Ukrainian refugees? Moreover, how is the arrival of Ukrainians reshaping social interactions, individual attitudes and post-2014 migrants' experiences? In this country report, we try to also address those questions to capitalise on the research conducted during yet another critical juncture.

National context and key findings from the Whole-COMM country reports

The approach to immigrant integration in the Netherlands can be described as rather centralized, characterized by a national dispersal mechanism in place, regulating asylum seeker reception and refugee settlement across the country, and a national Civic Integration Act, defining essential tasks for local authorities such as the provision of social support to recognized refugees.[1] Moreover, the national Housing Act specifies that municipalities have the legal obligation to provide housing for refugees.

In the WP3 country report, we show that because of local governments' previously limited role in this policy domain and because of the relatively low number of recognized refugees coming to the localities each year, all four localities in our case study opted for a rather mainstream, integrated approach instead of a target group-specific policy. However, we see that the four localities have also adopted their own localized responses to immigrant integration, reflected in differing frames of integration, differing local governance networks and support structures as well as differently allocated funding to the issue at hand.

In the WP4 country report, we explored migrants' access to housing and employment and found that access to housing is provided by the municipalities and thus is relatively easily accessible for recognized refugees. Yet, the overall process of finding housing is currently impacted by the accumulation of two 'crises' as the Netherlands is currently experiencing a 'housing crisis' and a 'reception crisis'. While the former has led to a shortage of social housing, the latter has increased the pressure on municipalities to find housing as fast as possible. The settlement of post-2014 refugees in the localities has at times led to tensions between long-term residents and newcomers in neighbourhoods with a higher concentration of social housing.

Access to employment is described as rather difficult and influenced by factors at the individual, macro-economic, policy and governance, and societal level. For example, at the policy and governance level, refugees are often channelled into the low-paid sector of the labor market and at the societal level, discrimination against refugees has had a negative influence on people's chances to find long-term, sustainable employment.

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[1] Importantly, under the new Civic Integration Act 2022, the task of immigrant integration has been (partially) decentralized, giving municipalities more responsibilities.

Drawing on the WP3 and WP4 country reports and new data collected for this work package, the report shows how national policies and regulations as well as specific local contexts with their own integration opportunity structures shape migrants' reciprocal attitudes, interactions and lived experiences.

We find that different factors shape migrants' lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion, including both locality-specific and more universal factors. While some factors facilitate inclusion and foster interaction between newcomers and long-term residents, others result in experiences of exclusion and form a barrier to mutual interaction.

Factors facilitating positive experiences of settlement and integration of post-2014 newcomers include a larger size of the locality, a higher level of population diversity and a more central location and connectivity of a locality. Importantly, 'larger size' does *not* refer to big cities such as Rotterdam or Amsterdam; on the contrary, many respondents appreciated the size of the localities they lived in (between 30.000 and 170.000) because of the perceived calmness and safety, but among the four cases, the medium-size town was evaluated the most positive because it had more job opportunities and a more established support infrastructure compared to the other three cases. Besides the spatial dimension, (local) governmental approaches that allow learning the language first and/or consider a person's educational and professional background with regards to future employment as well as permanent and accessible local support structures contribute to a positive integration experience. Here, neighbourhood houses and other organizations offering various (language) activities play a particularly important role because they provide opportunities for encounters with long-term residents, thereby facilitating interaction and exchange. Furthermore, a positive attitude towards newcomers among residents, political leadership, and high prioritization of integration on the local political agenda influence people's integration process positively. Overall, we find that the integration process was oftentimes easier for younger persons, for *recognized* refugees (as opposed to persons with a different or no legal status), for the higher educated, and for the ones who have lived in the country for a longer time and hence often speak the language better.

Factors that led to more negative experiences of integration for post-2014 migrants include the smaller size of a locality, a largely homogeneous population, and a peripheral location. With regards to governance-related factors, migrants experienced the national dispersal mechanism as particularly negative because it implied for many to lose valuable time in reception centers while waiting for the completion of their lengthy asylum procedure. Moreover, difficulties of finding a job corresponding to migrants' educational and professional background as well as (local) governmental pressure of taking low-paid jobs or unpaid volunteering/internship positions often resulted in frustration, perceived lack of recognition and experiences of exclusion. Other factors leading to a more negative experience include irregular and fragile local support structures and absence of spaces that provide opportunities for encounters with residents. We further find that awareness of negative discourses and images surrounding migrants/refugees, a negative attitude towards newcomers among residents, lack of political leadership, and/or limited attention for integration on the local political agenda influence people's integration process negatively. Some individual factors mentioned as having a disadvantaging effect for migrants were being of old(er) age, having a Muslim background, an irregular status, a lower educational background, or having only recently arrived.

2. Methodology

2.1 CASE SELECTION

The four localities on which this report focuses were selected based on several variables. All localities hosted a reception center for asylum-seekers or refugees between 2014 and 2017 and were still hosting some post-2014 migrants in late 2021. Case selection was conducted in the framework of the broader Whole-COMM project (see Caponio and Pettrachin 2021 for more details) in order to maximize variation among a set of variables including: population size , the share of non-EU migrant residents before the arrival of post-2014 migrants, unemployment levels before the arrival of post-2014 migrants, demographic trends before the arrival of post-2014 migrants, and the political parties in government (conservative vs. progressive).

Population size	Medium town: 100,000 − 250.000 Small town: 50,000 − 100,000 Rural area: 5,000 - 50,000 and low population density
Presence of a reception center AND/OR reception facilities	Time period: 2014-2017
Number of currently residing migrants	Time period: arrived after 2014
Share of foreign residents	Time period: in 2005 (SF2005)
Variation of unemployment level	Time period: 2005-2014 (VARUN)
AND/OR unemployment levels	Time period: 2005 and 2014
Variation of number of inhabitants	Time period: 2005-2014 (VARNI)
Regional variation	For example: East / West or North / South, choosing localities from different regions
Local politics	Parties in government and local political tradition, choosing localities with different political traditions (conservative / progressive)

Table 1: Overview of the selection variables

Some of these variables were additionally used to identify four types of localities:

Type	Characteristics	Selected cases in the Netherlands
Type A	Recovering local economy and improving demographic profile, migrants' settlement before 2014	Municipality A = Medium-size town Province Utrecht, region: West
Type B	Improving economic and demographic situation, no remarkable arrivals of migrants before 2014	Municipality B = Small town Province South Holland, region: West
Type C	Demographic and economic decline, migrants' settlement before 2014	Municipality C = Small town Province Overijssel, region: East
Type D	Economic and demographic decline, no remarkable arrivals of migrants before 2014	Municipality D = Rural area Province Drenthe, region: North

Table 2: Overview of the selected cases according to typology

In the Netherlands, four cases were selected.[2] To ensure regional variation, the four selected cases are distributed across four provinces, namely South Holland and Utrecht in the West of the Netherlands and Overijssel and Drenthe in the East and the North of the country, respectively. More information on the provinces and the cases is provided in chapter three.

2.2 DATA COLLECTION and ANALYSIS

In each locality, primary data was collected between June 2022 and October 2022 through participant observation, 31 in-depth interviews with post-2014 migrants and four focus group discussions with long-term residents and post-2014 migrants. Participant observation sites were selected to observe whether and how post-2014 migrants and long-term residents interact, and what potential barriers or facilitating factors for these interactions are, also considering that Covid-19 may have played a role in changing patterns of interaction. Interviews with post-2014 migrants were aimed at understanding migrants' experiences of inclusion/exclusion in SMsTRAs and at further analyzing the type of interactions observed through participant observation. Finally, focus groups discussions aimed at further exploring which variables are more relevant in each locality in shaping positive/negative social relations and individual attitudes.

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[2] The four selected cases may (slightly) vary from the ideal typical typology.

Importantly, the research in the Netherlands focuses primarily on the experiences and integration processes of *statushouders*. *Statushouders* are asylum seekers with a residence permit, that is, their asylum claim has been approved. For this report, the term 'refugee' or 'recognized refugee' will be used to refer to the group of *statushouders* to differentiate them clearly from the group of asylum seekers that have not (yet) received a final decision on their asylum claim and hence do not fall under the responsibility of local governments (that is, they are not officially registered as residents in the localities) and are not considered under the Civic Integration Act as 'obligated to integrate'.[3]

This focus also explains the selection of respondents for the **in-depth interviews:** in total, 31 interviews with 40 respondents were conducted of whom 36 are so-called *statushouders* (recognized refugees), two respondents are family migrants, and one respondent falls under the category of 'rejected asylum seeker'.[4] The number of respondents is higher than the number of conducted interviews because in locality C and D, six married couples were interviewed together (following the wish of the respondents). The sample includes 22 female and 18 male research participants. The estimated average age of the respondents lies between 35 and 40 years (with the majority of the respondents (29) being between 25 and 45 years old), four respondents are younger than 25 years old; four respondents are older than 55 years old. The countries of origin of the research participants comprise Syria (21 respondents), Eritrea (5), Yemen (4), Iran (2), Guinea (2), and the Philippines (2) as well as Afghanistan (1), Libya (1), Turkey (1), and Egypt (1). Importantly, many respondents spent many years in other (transit) countries before coming to the Netherlands, that is, their 'country of origin' (nationality) does not necessarily overlap with their previous country of residence (for example, some stayed in Saudi Arabia, others in Malaysia, Lebanon, or Turkey before arriving in the Netherlands). Half of the respondents has stayed in the selected Dutch localities for more than four years, the other half between one and three years. Most interviewees are married and have children, approximately one third is single (and without children), some are still waiting for their family reunification and in some cases a partner was not mentioned and/or the partner is currently not in the Netherlands.

More than half of the respondents has a university degree (incl. Bachelor, Master, and PhD), seven went to primary school, two mentioned 'other qualifications' and nine did not explicitly mention a degree but spoke about their work experience (albeit not necessarily 'qualified' work, that is, they

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[3] Importantly, in other contexts the term 'refugee' is also used to refer to persons fleeing war, violence, conflict, or persecution (UNHCR) more broadly (not exclusively to refer to those who are officially recognized as refugees and have been granted a residence permit accordingly).

[4] The focus on recognized refugees can be explained as follows: First, we follow the overall project's focus on post-2014 migrants that have arrived in Europe in an 'irregular' manner after 2014 (Caponio & Pettrachin 2021). Second, asylum seekers without a status are not officially registered at a municipality and do not fall under the nationally defined Civic Integration Act, that is, they are (with exceptions) not targeted by national and local integration policies. Third, other 'types' of migrants such as labor migrants from EU Member States or 'knowledge migrants' from third countries follow a different legal, housing, and economic trajectory and are often not explicitly addressed in national and local integration policies. Accordingly, explanations about the national and local legal framework, about the characteristics of the four localities and persons' access to rights and services revolve predominantly around the group of 'recognized refugees' who are registered as residents in the localities. Where necessary, main similarities and differences between different 'types' of migrants will be touched upon.

worked in their country of residence in a profession that did not require a diploma/qualification). Finally, more than half of the research participants are currently not employed: 15 respondents do not work, but the reasons for that vary and range from higher age and related health issues to very recent arrival and focus on language learning to pregnancy and/or young children at home to no permission to work; ten respondents do voluntary work. Of the ones who have 'paid employment', 'only' four work in a sector (and on a level) that corresponds with their previous (or currently acquired) education, seven have paid employment, but in the 'low paid sector', and four follow an internship/education.[5]

All interview partners were approached via organizations that work in different capacities with post-2014 migrants, including local language cafés (locality A and B), a local library (locality B), the main non-profit service providers for refugees (locality B and C), a local language school (locality D), the municipality (locality D) or other non-public organizations offering services to newcomers or residents more generally (locality A and D). Finding respondents via different channels (for example, via personal contacts of respondents) proved very difficult. Accessing respondents mainly through official organizations means that narratives of those not connected to such organizations cannot be represented to the same extent in our report. Most interviews were conducted in public spaces (local libraries, language school or the office spaces of the main non-profit service providers for refugees); seven respondents invited the researcher to their house.

Besides the 31 in-depth interviews, data was collected in **focus groups**. Despite the intention to organize one focus group with both post-2014 migrants and long-term residents in all four localities, the organization of the focus groups turned out to be more difficult than anticipated. In municipality A, one person attended the organized focus group which led to the decision to 'turn' the focus group into a one-hour in-depth interview. In municipality B, 12 persons participated in the focus group discussion, including three long-term residents (two without 'migration background', one with 'migration background') and nine newcomers with a refugee background. In municipality C, eight persons joined the focus group discussion, including one long-term resident without migration background and seven newcomers. Lastly, in municipality D, two persons (one refugee and one person without migration background working in the municipality) joined the discussion. With regards to the difficulties in organizing the focus groups in municipality A and D, we received different forms of feedback, ranging from 'bad timing' (the summer holidays had just started) over (too) good weather ('people prefer staying outside') to the 'wrong' schedule (focus group starting too early in the day for the ones working). The higher attendance rate in municipalities B and C can largely be explained by the commitment of employees and volunteers working for the main non-profit service providers for refugees who agreed to helping us and invited participants personally. Reaching potential participants via channels such as public Facebook Groups or neighborhood houses who were not familiar with us/our research project, proved less successful.

Data collection through **participant observation** in the four localities included visits and observation of different sites, but also participation in local language activities, attendance of an 'open day' in a

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[5] A table with a more detailed overview of the conducted interviews can be found in the appendix.

local asylum seeker center and *informal* conversations with residents, volunteers, or employees of local organizations. For instance, in all four localities the researcher visited various local neighborhood houses and the local libraries and spent time there (to observe, meet respondents or join language courses), she went to local cafés, visited the welfare organizations and/or non-profit service providers for refugees and spoke to people working at a church, supermarket or language cafés ('small talk').

All interviews were fully transcribed and coded by the first researcher, using a concept-driven and data-driven coding approach. That is, concept-driven codes (mostly based on the interview guide and the four dimensions presented above) were subsequently complemented by 'data-driven' codes (codes emerging from the data more inductively). The notes taken during the focus groups were analyzed based on the codes that emerged during the interview analysis, while keeping an open mind towards newly emerging themes that were not named during the interviews.

2.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

After describing the sample and methods used for data collection, we now turn to some ethical considerations. Our reflections start from the acknowledgement that the research process is shaped by the social, cultural, personal, and professional background and (ascribed) roles (based on nationality, gender, age etc.) of the researcher(s) involved in the process of data collection and analysis (in this case, the main researcher in the project is a young *white* woman, holding an EU citizenship and a university degree). These positionings according to different social categories may differ in each interview setting – also depending on the person(s) sitting opposite of the researcher(s), thus requiring a continuous re-negotiation and re-evaluation of roles from both the interviewer(s) and interviewee(s) (Doná 2007; Fedyuk & Zentai 2018).

Due to these different influencing factors, it is necessary to be sensitive to the setting and context in which the interview is being conducted and take a reflexive stance, in particular with regards to (potential) unequal power dynamics between researcher(s) and research participant(s) (Bryman 2016; Fedyuk & Zentai 2018). This is particularly relevant in research settings where vulnerable groups such as refugees are involved. We do not intend to describe research participants primarily along the lines of their refugee background and distance ourselves from depictions of refugees as passive victims; nonetheless, we acknowledge that refugees may have often suffered from physical, psychological, and emotional traumas because of the (in)direct experience of violence or the loss of family members and friends. Moreover, their legal status (or lack thereof) may impact their independence and autonomy as they are often dependent on external (governmental) support and limited in their ability to access or exercise rights (Doná 2007; Eastmond 2007). Trust, sensitivity, and the awareness of the responsibility as a researcher – also regarding potential consequences of the research for the participants – are therefore central elements of the research process. It thus is important to inform the respondents about the purpose, employed methods and conditions of the research, including the way the data will be handled. This information serves as the basis for their informed and voluntary consent regarding their participation in the research (Mackenzie *et al.* 2007; Vervliet *et al.* 2015).

Before starting the interview, the researcher therefore asked for the permission to record the interview, explained what will happen with the data afterwards and stressed the importance of

anonymization. Moreover, the researcher deemed it important to give interviewees as much freedom as possible to choose what they would like to focus on and which parts of their life stories they (do not) want to share, while being aware that the questions (based on a previously designed interview guide) steered the conversation in a particular direction. The researcher emphasized before and during the interview that respondents should only answer questions they felt comfortable with, trying to ensure that respondents can shape the research process according to their own expectations.

Sometimes the researcher had the impression that the respondents felt a bit uncomfortable and insecure about whether their answers were 'accurate' or 'sufficient' or they seemed a bit confused about where the conversation was going. For example, in some instances, the interviews were conducted with the help of an interpreter. While this enabled the respondents to participate in their own language (Arabic), it also created a certain distance between the interviewer and the respondents, making it difficult for the interviewer to fully grasp whether a respondent had understood the scope and aim of the research. In one instance, a respondent seemed disappointed because the interview questions were related more broadly to his life in the locality, instead of focusing on the problem of insufficient hours in the local language school. He appeared to be quite irritated – which was something the researcher only found out later after having seen the complete interview transcript (the interviews were transcribed with the help of a student with an Arabic language background). It turned out that the interpreter had not translated the respondent's replies word by word, but rather in a summarizing manner. Communicating in different languages can create a barrier in which certain aspects – including emotions – get literally lost in translation, adding to the perceived asymmetry in the interview setting.

In other instances, the researcher sensed that respondents wanted to say more, and explain themselves better, but were constrained by their language. In some cases, it proved difficult for the researcher to fully convey the overall concept of the research project. For some respondents who had not studied at a university and/or did not have children who studied, the idea of a research project with multiple stakeholders involved seemed very abstract. This, in turn, may have had consequences for the 'informed consent' which may have been given without understanding the full concept of the research, potentially also as a favor to the volunteer who provided access to the research participants.

More generally, many respondents preferred giving their verbal consent instead of signing an informed consent form and preferred notes taking over recording the interview. In some instances, respondents did not want to sign the informed consent form or have the interview recorded because they felt anxious that information given during the interview could be used against them if on record, explaining their fear and distrust with their experience in other countries where it could be dangerous to trust the authorities or researchers asking questions. In such instances, the researcher pointed out that participation in the research was strictly voluntary and that consent (verbally or written) was by no means binding. In most cases, people agreed to do the interview, only one person withdrew their participation in the research project after having seen the informed consent form. All respondents were informed about the anonymization strategy of the project.

A last aspect that is important to mention is the question of reciprocity (Mackenzie *et al.* 2007; Vervliet *et al.* 2015). It was often not possible to respond to the more urgent needs or problems of research

participants directly (for example, dissatisfaction with language courses, difficulties finding a job, delay in family reunification, or even threat of deportation). Yet, it has been pointed out that telling a story and 'being heard' may also be interpreted as a form of empowerment because the voices of the actors become an important element in the production of knowledge about their world (Brekke & Aarset 2009; Sherman Heyl 2001). This was to some extent also reflected in the interviews after which many respondents thanked the researcher to have been given the opportunity to share their story. Conversely, the report aims to shed light on people's insights and perspectives, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of lived experiences of persons who have arrived in the Netherlands in the past years. In addition to this report, the results will be shared via other Whole-COMM (related) activities such as policy workshops, or the publication of academic as well as newspaper articles.

3. Main findings per locality

3.1 Introducing the national context and provinces

This section will first provide a brief overview of the national context, before introducing the four provinces, regarding population size, share of residents with a 'migration background' and the reception of asylum seekers as well as recognized refugees over the past years.

3.1.1 The Dutch national context

In the Netherlands, migration and, concomitantly, immigrant integration are politicized topics; this has become, yet again, apparent in recent debates surrounding possible solutions to the so-called 'reception crisis'. The political parties in power have struggled over the past year to find the 'right' approach to regulate and manage the reception of asylum seekers and have finally – after lengthy negotiations and under mounting tensions in the prime minister's party – agreed on a new law, transferring more responsibility to the local level.[6] Similarly, the priority regulation, giving municipalities the possibility to prioritize refugees when assigning them to social housing, is highly politicized by right-wing parties at the national level, which see an unfair advantage in giving refugees an 'urgency treatment' just because they are refugees.[7]

The politicization of the topic is not only visible at the national level, but also at the local level, where residents have protested and resisted the (potential) reception of asylum seekers in their municipality, at times very strongly. For example, in one municipality (which is not part of our sample) residents have organized multiple demonstrations in front of a hotel purchased by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) to prevent the reception of asylum seekers there.[8] And local

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[6] https://nos.nl/artikel/2451533-spanning-bij-vvd-loopt-op-trekt-rutte-fractie-over-streep-voor-asielwet
[7] https://nos.nl/artikel/2430979-kamer-worstelt-met-voorrang-voor-statushouders-in-tijden-van-woningnood
[8] https://nos.nl/artikel/2441173-opnieuw-protest-tegen-azc-in-hotel-ook-kamerleden-in-albergen

newspapers regularly problematize the nuisance in asylum seeker centers caused by migrants from so-called safe countries who (usually) do not receive an international protection status.[9]

However, these recent and ongoing protests and demonstrations by some residents form only one part of the picture because the attitude towards refugees in the Netherlands is in general rather positive. A study published by the national statistical office, Statistics Netherlands (CBS), in 2018 shows that 77% of the adult population is of the opinion that the Netherlands should receive refugees who have fled their country due to war or persecution, only 8% disagree with this statement and 15% are neutral on this issue. Interestingly, age, origin and the 'degree of urbanity' of a municipality do not play a role, contrary to educational background and gender which appear to influence people's attitude towards refugees significantly: 84% of the highly educated have a positive attitude towards the reception of refugees versus 71% of the ones with a lower educational background; 84% of the female survey participants – versus 74% of the male participants – agree that the Netherlands should receive refugees. Moreover, people who are in contact with refugees are more often in favor of their reception, especially if their experience with refugees was positive (Kloosterman 2018, 6-7).

While more than 70% are in favour of receiving refugees (this concerns asylum seeker and refugee *reception*), 22% of the Dutch population sees refugees as a *threat to security* in the Netherlands and 27% believe refugees pose a *threat to Dutch norms and values*. Here, men, people with lower education, people with a Dutch background and residents of little urbanized municipalities hold less positive attitudes towards refugees than women, highly educated people, people with a non-Western migration background and residents of more urbanized municipalities (Kloosterman 2018, 8).

A recent study published by the *Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau* in 2022 shows from the perspective of persons with a migration background who have lived in the Netherlands for some time or were born here, that they often experience discrimination because of their origin and half of the survey participants do not consider the Netherlands as a hospitable country for people with a migration background. People from Iran or Somalia who arrived in the Netherlands as refugees experience less exclusion and are more often satisfied with the political system than the more established groups (that is, people with a Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, or Caribbean-Dutch background). This more positive outlook is according to the authors of the study characteristic of (first-generation) refugees:

> "For example, we see this in Syrians who have arrived in the Netherlands in recent years. Their frame of reference is still very much their country of origin, where the nature of the political systems there prompted them to flee. This comparison colours their thinking about (opportunities in) the Netherlands and how Dutch politics work." (Dagevos, de Voogd-Hamelink & Damen 2022, 17)

Most survey participants without a migration background are positive about cultural diversity in the Netherlands (71%), but some share concerns about the increasing diversity of the population.

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[9] https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/waarom-kansloze-asielzoekers-extreme-overlast-veroorzaken-en-de-overheid-daarmee-worstelt~bee9fc92/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F

While these studies represent a comprehensive overview on the topic from a national perspective, this report will zoom into the four selected localities to explore to what extent these political and media discourses as well as attitudes towards refugees influence local dynamics between newcomers and long-term residents and thus their lived experiences of in- and exclusion.

3.1.2 The four provinces

As previously mentioned, the four selected communities are distributed across four provinces, namely Utrecht (locality A) and South Holland (locality B) in the West of the Netherlands and Overijssel (locality C) and Drenthe (locality D) in the East and the North of the country, respectively.

Source: https://www.regioatlas.nl/kaarten
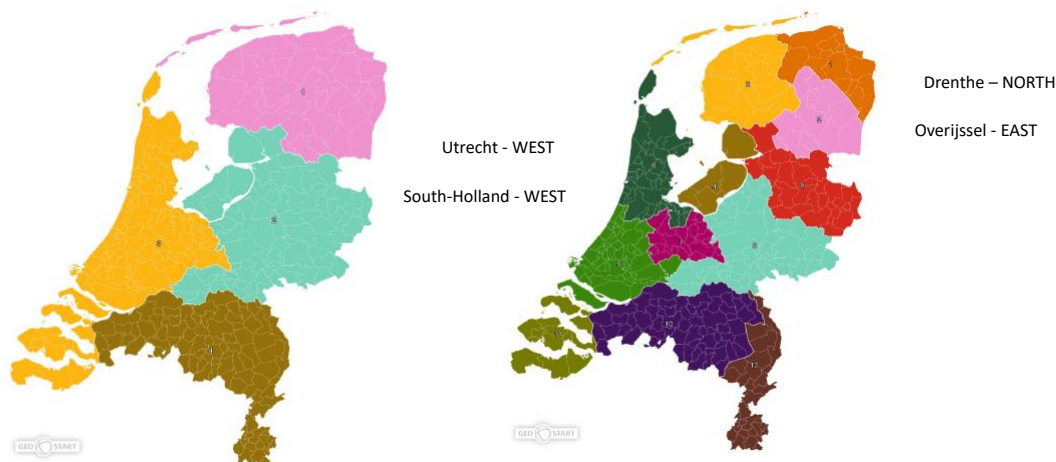
The Western provinces South Holland and Utrecht are part of the *Randstad*, a densely populated metropolitan region, including the biggest Dutch cities Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht. With its high demand for labor and direct access to the sea, the region has since long attracted migrants from different parts of the world. Over the past twenty years, the population of the two Western provinces has become increasingly more diverse: South Holland experienced an increase in the share of population with a 'migration background' from 23% in 2000 to more than 33% in 2021, while the numbers in the province Utrecht (23,8% in 2021) are comparable to the national average of 24,6%.[10] In contrast, the North and the East of the Netherlands are less densely populated and both regions have a considerably lower number of residents with a 'migration background'. In Drenthe, the number of residents with a 'migration background' has slightly increased from 8% in 2000 to 10% in

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[10] The national statistical office, Statistics Netherlands (CBS), defines a person with a migration background as a "person of whom at least one parent was born abroad." CBS further differentiates between persons with a Western migration background and persons with a non-Western migration background. The latter category refers to persons "originating from a country in Africa, South America or Asia (excl. Indonesia and Japan) or from Turkey" (CBS: https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/onze-diensten/methods/definitions/person-with-a-migration-background). As of 2022, this differentiation will be replaced by new categories which will be based on continents and common immigration countries (see for more details: https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2022/nieuwe-indeling-bevolking-naar-herkomst/2-de-nieuwe-herkomstindeling-in-het-kort.) Since the cases for this research were selected using statistical data from 2021 and earlier, the 'old' categories will be used.

2021; Overijssel has experienced an increase from 12,8% to more than 16 %, of which 9 % account for migrants from 'non-Western countries' (compared to 4,8% in Drenthe).

Asylum seekers have been hosted throughout the country in reception centers in different types of localities, including rural areas, mid-sized towns, and big cities, with a higher share of reception facilities in the Eastern and Northern part of the Netherlands and in small(er) municipalities. All four provinces have accommodated asylum seekers as well as recognized refugees, although the numbers differ significantly over time and across provinces. South Holland, the biggest and most densely populated province in the sample with 3.7 million residents, had to accommodate 6.138 refugees in 2015 and 2.527 in 2020. The highly urbanized province Utrecht with its 1.36 million residents was asked to accommodate 2.159 refugees in 2015 and 934 in 2020. In comparison, the less densely populated and most rural province Drenthe with 494.000 residents had to accommodate 840 refugees in 2015 and 343 in 2020. Lastly, Overijssel with ca. 1.17 million residents was asked to accommodate 1.958 refugees in 2015 and 803 in 2020. In total, the four provinces accommodated around 38 % of the total number of refugees in both 2015 and 2020.[11]

Importantly, the geographical positionality of the four localities in the provinces also influences people's 'integration experience'. For example, municipalities A and B's location in the "Netherlands' major population and employment agglomeration" (EURES, 2022) is important as it also determines available job opportunities for refugees (there are more job opportunities compared to the East of the country) or opportunities to continue their education.[12] In locality B for example, the actual job opportunities in the town itself are limited but because of its good connection to bigger cities in the surrounding, the general employment level is rather high. Moreover, locality A and B are in proximity to bigger university cities which makes them more attractive compared to smaller localities that are less connected to cities with institutions of higher education (according to respondents).

3.2 Findings from the four localities

The table provides an overview of the four selected cases in the provinces. The chapter below will introduce the cases in more detail and present the findings per locality.

	Municipality A Medium size town	Municipality B Small town	Municipality C Small town	Municipality D Rural area
Province / Region	Province Utrecht, Region: West	Province South Holland, Region: West	Province Overijssel, Region: East	Province Drenthe, Region: North

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[11] All data presented in this section is derived from CBS (Statistics Netherlands).
[12] Information on the provinces' labor market is available here: https://ec.europa.eu/eures/public/living-and-working/labour-market-information/labour-market-information-netherlands_en.

Size	140.000 – 170.000	50.000 – 80.000	50.000 – 80.000	20.000 – 40.000
Population composition	25% with migration background (2021)	12% with migration background (2021)	27% with migration background (2021)	9% with migration background (2021)
Demographics	Population growth Slightly ageing population	Population growth Ageing population	Population growth Ageing population	Population decline Ageing Population
Employment	Unemployment level lower than national average	Unemployment level lower than national average	Unemployment level higher than national average	Unemployment level similar to national average
Political orientation (2018-2022)	Progressive & conservative	Center / center-right (Christian conservative)	Conservative	Conservative/moderate with strong local party

Table 3: Overview of the selected cases

3.2.1 Municipality A (medium-size, province Utrecht)

Municipality A lies in the province Utrecht in the West of the Netherlands and has approximately 140.000 to 170.000 residents.[13] More than 25% of the **local population** has a 'migration background' (2021), of which more than 16% are categorized as 'non-Western'. The share of foreign residents has increased in the last 10 years by approximately 2% (more than 2% for 'non-Western'). These numbers are similar to the national average where almost 25% of the population has a migration background (of which 14% are categorized as 'non-Western'). In 2020, approximately 1200 adult recognized refugees resided in the municipality (Divosa/Stimulansz, 2020). A member of the local government estimates that each year between 100 and 150 refugees arrive in the city (N-A-8).[14] Because the municipality does not have a regular reception center, the city does not host a lot of asylum seekers. However, in situations with a higher influx of asylum seekers, the city has provided emergency shelters. Currently, the municipality has two reception centers where approximately 450 people from Ukraine can stay (temporarily) (date: November 2022).

Overall, the local population has grown over the past 10 years and has become slightly older, that is the ratio between the number of people aged 65 or over and the number of people aged 20 to 65 ("grey pressure") has increased by 6% (compared to the national average of more than 10%) (CBS).

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[13] For anonymization purposes, the exact number of residents will not be disclosed.

[14] For local level respondents interviewed for WP3 and WP4, the acronym N - [locality type A/B/C/D] - [number of interviewee] is used to quote and refer to the respective interviewees in the report. For example: N-A-1 is respondent no. 1 from locality A. Importantly, the numbering does *not* follow a chronological order. For respondents interviewed for WP5 (post-2014 migrants), the acronym [locality type A/B/C/D] – [number of interviewee] is used to quote and refer to the respective interviewee. For example, A1 is the first migrant respondents from locality A. When more people were interviewed at the same time, _1 or _2 is added.

Based on the survey, the **economic situation** in the city can be described as "rather good" (4 respondents) to "very good" (3 respondents).[15] In the past five years, both the number of jobs as well as the number of companies have increased significantly (LISA and I&O Research). The unemployment level is lower than national average and on average there are fewer people with a low educational background. However, when comparing the labor market participation of persons with a Dutch background to persons with a 'non-Western migration background' it becomes apparent that the latter is on average less often employed: for example, in 2020, almost 75% of persons with a Dutch background were working, compared to 65% of persons with a 'non-Western migration background'. When only considering recognized refugees, the percentage is even lower – among the persons who arrived in the municipality between 2014 and 2017, approximately 40% were employed in 2021; for the groups who arrived later (between 2018 and 2021), the percentage lies at around 10%. In total, 30% of all refugees living in the municipality is employed – with more than half not working full time or having multiple jobs (Divosa/Stimulansz, 2021).

Similar to the rest of the country, the **local housing market** in the city is described as 'overheated' and characterized by a "big shortage of social housing" as well as a "stuck free market" due to a shrinking number of housing available for rent or purchase (performance agreement between the municipality and the local housing corporations, 2021). Approximately 27% of the available rental housing is social housing (slightly above average; BZK datawonen, 2020). Because of the national dispersal mechanism in place, refugees are allocated in social housing provided by the municipality.[16] Due to the uneven distribution of social housing in the city, there is accordingly also an uneven spatial concentration of refugees/migrants in certain neighborhoods. In addition to 'regular' social housing, municipality A has also initiated various projects that offer temporary housing such as a 'mixed housing project' where various target groups live together, including first-time renters, but also former unaccompanied minors and other groups that fall under 'youth care'. Young people living in the 'mixed community' are supported by employees of two local housing corporations and joint activities between residents are encouraged. The mixed housing project offers small studios/one-bedroom apartments and is centrally located. Municipality A has also started converting former office budlings into living spaces in which refugees, people affected by homelessness and long-term home seekers will live/are living together.

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[15] As part of WP3 and WP4 of the project, an online survey was conducted, asking respondents to evaluate the economic situation in the locality and its development over the past years. More information can be found in the WP3 country report on the project's website: https://whole-comm.eu/working-papers/country-report-on-multilevel-dynamics-netherlands/.

[16] Within two weeks after receiving their residence permit, recognized refugees are allocated to municipalities by the national implementing body COA (the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers), taking into consideration various factors such as family size, country of origin, language, education, work experience, work contract, existing networks, medical details or plans for the future (Rijksoverheid Huisvesting Statushouder, 2022). The national level determines every six months the number of recognized refugees that each municipality has to accommodate. Importantly, while not every municipality has a local reception center for asylum seekers, *all* municipalities have the obligation to house recognized refugees (after they leave the reception center). See for more information on the Dutch housing market and the national dispersal mechanism the country report for WP4: https://whole-comm.eu/working-papers/country-report-on-integration-the-netherlands/.

The **political orientation** of the city is a 'mixed' one: Progressive and (conservative) Christian democratic parties together hold the majority of seats in the municipal council (before the municipal elections in 2022). The member of the local government responsible for integration has an affiliation with a progressive party. Some respondents refer more generally to the importance of the Christian heritage in representations of this locality to explain residents' social engagement towards refugees (N-A-1, N-A-6, N-A-8, N-A-12).

RELEVANT INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE LOCALITY

With regards to relevant infrastructure in the city, respondents positively mentioned that the city lies in the centre of the Netherlands and is very well connected to bigger cities in the *Randstad* by train. This is also reflected in the researcher's fieldwork experience where municipality A was very easily accessible (trains arriving and departing regularly from/towards Rotterdam and municipality A). Reaching smaller municipalities in the surrounding region by public transport was, in contrast, more difficult with busses only running a few times per hour and fewer direct connections. Besides a well-developed public transport system, municipality A also appears to have a well-established integration-related infrastructure with multiple local language schools, a centrally located public library, various neighbourhood houses, sports associations/sports facilities, churches (offering social activities), mosques, and a very accessible non-profit organization for refugees. Respondents did not mention any difficulties regarding the diversity of educational institutions and there appear to be sufficient spaces to meet such as public parks or gardens (besides other spaces such as the church or the library). Finally, there are various shopping possibilities, including Syrian or Turkish supermarkets.

ORGANIZATIONAL LANDSCAPE IN THE LOCALITY

The main *formal* actor in the organizational landscape in the medium-sized town is a local **non-profit, non-public service provider** which functions as the first contact point for refugees in the city and supports them during their civic integration over a duration of three years (N-A-1). The organization has formally been assigned the legal task of 'social support' by the municipality and thus acts as the implementing body at the local level.[17] Besides social support, the non-profit service provider offers in-house language courses, assistance with labor market integration as well as finding accommodation. The assigned tasks are carried out by both paid staff (e.g., integration coaches) as well as volunteers and in close collaboration with the municipality and the housing corporations. The non-profit service provider for integration is described as an easily accessible organization, a "spider in the web" which works closely together with other public and non-public actors and is in close contact with all refugees following the civic integration program (N-A-8). The organization was founded more than 40 years ago.

A second important actor is the local **welfare organization** which mainly operates at the neighborhood level. The local welfare organization has information 'shops' in the neighborhoods, works with social

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[17] Under the national Civic Integration Act, municipalities are responsible for the legal task 'social support' for which they receive 2.370€ per refugee. Municipalities (usually) assign this task to a non-public organization which then supports and guides the refugees in the first years after their arrival in the municipality. See the WP3 country report for more information on the implementation of the task at the local level.

care workers and social neighborhood teams (N-A-1, N-A-6). The organization is responsible for the allocation of grants to city- or neighborhood-based initiatives organized by residents, focusing for instance on 'meedoen' (participation), the facilitation of collaboration, or the prevention of loneliness (N-A-6). The local welfare organization set up a website which contains information on local and neighborhood-based initiatives, project, and activities. Moreover, it is also responsible for the coordination of the 'Network Integration' which was initiated in 2019 by the municipality to bring together formal and informal actors working in the field of integration, including churches, mosques, and migrant-led organizations. Initially, almost 70 actors were invited to join the network; nowadays, the network comprises 20 to 25 active members.

On the topic of housing, the municipality collaborates closely with three **private housing corporations** as well as the main local non-profit service provider for integration. The housing corporations are also collaboration partners for broader housing-related developments in the city.

More generally, respondents emphasize that there is a high number of informal organizations and initiatives working with migrants and refugees, ranging from migrant-led organizations over various language cafés and buddy projects to neighborhood-based initiatives focusing more generally on social cohesion (N-A-3 N-A-4 N-A-6 N-A-8 N-A-9), numbers ranging from 60 to 80. These **local organizations** focusing on supporting migrants and refugees do not necessarily receive funding from the municipality to implement legal tasks such as 'social support' as defined in the Civic Integration Act. Nonetheless, they provide crucial additional support in areas such as labor market integration, psychological support, informal language education and social network building. They often significantly contribute to the facilitation of interaction between newcomers and long-term residents.

One example is a **national initiative**[18] which focuses on the 'social side' of integration, aiming at expanding newcomers' network and building friendships by matching newcomers and long-term residents ('buddy system'; N-A-4). Another example is a **local language café** where newcomers can practice Dutch. The coordinator of the language café emphasizes that they are more than 'just' a place where people improve their language; people "also come to celebrate their birthday or the birth of a child" (N-A-13). This was also confirmed by various respondents who refer to such initiatives as crucial for their social life and wellbeing.

Finally, the local library offers three times a week a 'walk-in hour'; expats, asylum seekers, refugees, and family migrants use the library's language-related services (language café, courses for reading and writing, individual solutions). The library was often mentioned by respondents as a nice place to meet and based on participant observation conducted in the library it indeed appeared to be a place where many different people come together to work, study, spend time and interact.

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[18] The researcher reached out to more organizations but has only received a positive response by some of the organizations that are active in the integration field. Interviews were conducted with organizations that were named by multiple respondents and appeared to be key actors in the field (such as the national initiative matching newcomers and long-term residents).

PRO/ANTI MIGRANT MOBILIZATION

With regards to the **topic of integration** more generally almost all interviewees (interviewed for WP3 and 4) describe the situation in the city as positive and welcoming. According to multiple respondents, the positive and open climate in the city becomes particularly apparent in the long-term involvement of many volunteers who seem to play a very important role for the integration of migrants and refugees (N-A-1, N-A-3, N-A-5, N-A-8, N-A-9, N-A-12). Moreover, respondents highlight that the topic of integration has received a lot of attention and support from the local government and the municipal council. (Former) members of the local government and local officials alike underline the importance of showing support at the political level to form a positive narrative around integration and diversity. The mayor has become a role model over the years, reflecting the open and welcoming attitude of the municipality (and its administration) and the city's population (N-A-5, N-A-8, N-A-9).

In 2015, there was some resistance in neighborhoods with regards to the reception and housing of asylum seekers, but no actual protests (N-A-12). However, in the light of the housing crisis, some residents have expressed resentment regarding the priority regulation for refugees, believing that they contribute to the shortage of affordable housing (N-A-1, N-A-14, N-A-15). In terms of pro-migrant mobilization, respondents highlight the strong involvement and engagement of both residents, and the local government (N-A-12). One example is a petition that was started in 2015 by a group of volunteers who demanded that asylum seekers who were at that time residing in the municipality in an emergency shelter were to stay in the city once recognized as refugees. As a result, the mayor started negotiations with COA (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) and succeeded – most refugees were able to stay and settle down in the city (N-A-5, N-A-9, N-A-12, N-A-13). The same group of volunteers also set up a Facebook group in 2015 which is up until now very actively used to mobilize help and support for newcomers (e.g., collection of clothes, bikes, furniture; promotion of informal language support and social activities; spread of relevant information etc.).

Despite this open attitude towards newcomers, respondents also mention challenges regarding refugee integration, namely spatial segregation in and between neighbourhoods, social tensions related to (perceived) cultural or religious differences between different groups (N-A-1, N-A-6, N-A-7, N-A-8) and difficulties for refugees to find *paid* employment (N-A-3, N-A-6, N-A-13). Some of these aspects were also mentioned by the respondents interviewed for this report, as will be shown below.

DESCRIPTION OF CONDUCTED FIELDWORK IN LOCALITY A

Participant observation in locality A included various site visits and participation in a local language café as well as an 'open day' in the local asylum seeker center. One of the sites which the researcher visited often was the public library as well as the space in front of the library. The library is located next to a public square which is surrounded by restaurants and shopping facilities (including supermarkets). On the square itself, there are various sitting possibilities where people meet each other (next to the ones that are linked to the restaurants and the library). On different times of the day, the square as well as the library attracted different visitors with different backgrounds. The square appeared to be both meeting point and a place where people would come to do their groceries. It is located next to a small river and less than 10 minutes by bike from the train station and the city center. Although not

located in the city center itself, the square and its surrounding appeared to be a popular spot for people to meet. Some respondents also mentioned that they liked coming to the square to hang out with their friends or to go to the library with their children (also mentioned by the participant in the focus group).

Besides the square and the library, the researcher also visited the local asylum seeker center, a mixed housing project, and different neighborhood houses. Moreover, the researcher was invited to join a language activity in a local church by the coordinator of the initiative to meet potential respondents and to experience the meetings that are regularly attended by newcomers. This gave the researcher the opportunity to not only explore a new neighborhood (in which the church, where the language activity took place, was located), but to also see and hear first-hand in which setting newcomers come together and what their experiences are. The researcher was also invited to join a meeting with volunteers participating in a buddy project with newcomers. During this meeting, the researcher was able to learn more about the 'other' side of the medal, namely the experiences of (Dutch) volunteers and their motivation to be part of such a project. Finally, during the field visits of the local asylum seekers center and the mixed housing project, the researcher was able to gain a first impression of how and where refugees live. The observations and conversations during these field visits complement the information gained through the in-depth interviews conducted in locality A.

In total, seven **interviews** were conducted in locality A and one interview in a smaller town nearby (with a woman who regularly attended the local language activity the researcher joined). The sample of research participants comprises four women and four men; six respondents have a refugee status, two are family migrants who received their residence permit via their Dutch husband. Some respondents have arrived very recently in municipality A, others have lived in the city for up to seven years. The table provides an overview of the respondents and their personal characteristics.

No	Country of origin	Age	Gender	Legal status	Family status	Level of education	Employment in locality	Residence in country/in locality
1	Philippines	25-35	Female	Family migrant	Married	University	Paid employment (not corresponding)	4 years
2	Philippines	25-35	Female	Family migrant	Married, one child	Qualification / degree	Paid employment (corresponding)	5 years
3	Syria	> 55	Female	Refugee*	Divorced, three sons	No degree, but work experience	Voluntary work	6 years
4	Iran	35-45	Female	Refugee	Married, two children	University	Voluntary work	5 years/ 4 years
5	Eritrea	20-25	Male	Refugee	Single	Educational qualification (in NL)	Paid employment (not corresponding)	7 years

6	Yemen	25-35	Male	Refugee	Single	University	Language internship	2,5 years/ 1,5 years
7	Syria	25-35	Male	Refugee	Single	University	Paid employment (corresponding)	2,5 years/ 1,5 years
8	Syria	25-35	Male	Refugee	Single	University	Paid employment (corresponding)	2 years/ 1,5 years

*The status 'refugee' refers to persons who are legally recognized as refugees and received an international protection permit (so-called *statushouders*).

Table 4: Respondent overview Locality A

The respondents were selected primarily because of their recent arrival in municipality A as 'migrant' or 'refugee' (after 2014). The researcher met four respondents in the previously mentioned language café; she was referred to three respondents via a buddy project and one respondent was contacted via representatives of the mixed housing project. The sample thus comprises persons who are already actively involved in existing activities and programs (thus linked to an organization) and whose experiences may therefore differ (significantly) from persons who are not linked to any organization. Yet, it should be added that all officially registered refugees receive social support by a non-public service provider where they also learn about volunteering opportunities and other activities in the city; it thus is relatively common for refugees to be in touch with at least one organization. Five interviews were conducted in the public library, two interviews were conducted outside, and one respondent invited the researcher to her house where the researcher also met the respondent's two daughters.

As previously mentioned, organizing a focus group in municipality A proved to be very difficult. The researcher tried to find participants for the focus group via different means, for example, by contacting interview partners from WP3 and WP4 and asking for their support, by posting the invitation on a very popular Facebook Group, by calling and emailing neighborhood houses and migrant-led organizations or by asking interviewed newcomers if they knew people who could be interested in joining the discussion. Despite these efforts, only one person attended the focus group discussion which is why the researchers decided to interview her instead. The participant was a young, female long-term resident (with a migration background and Dutch nationality) in municipality A who had worked on a voluntary basis with newcomers for an extensive amount of time. In this way, she could give us insights on challenges that newcomers encounter, but also reflect on her own views on the topic.

After describing the fieldwork conducted in municipality A, we now turn to the analysis and discussion of the data collected, highlighting the main factors influencing social interactions, attitudes and lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS, INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDES, AND MIGRANTS' EXPERIENCES

This section looks at the various dimensions that influence and shape lived experiences of in- and exclusion and social interactions between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents as well as reciprocal attitudes. The analysis and discussion are primarily based on eight in-depth interviews that were conducted in municipality A, complemented by some more general observations during the various field visits as well as (if needed) interviews conducted for WP3 and WP4.

Spatial dimension

First, the **spatial dimension**: almost all respondents appear to be very satisfied with living in the medium-sized town in the province Utrecht. They positively relate the size of the city and its central location in the Netherlands to available job opportunities and a well-established infrastructure which allows them to travel easily to other (bigger) cities. Some respondents have used this proximity to a bigger city to attend specific, more intensive language courses there. Most respondents further appreciate that the city is not 'too big' and therefore rather 'calm' (*rustig*) and not 'too busy' (*druk*), it is "a nice combination of an old city and nature, with a bit of water" (A1). In the focus group interview, the participant also described the city as "cozy, small, not very busy, but still quite multicultural and more tolerant than other places". While some respondents call the city their new home and would for sure like to stay (A1, A3), others would move to another city 'to follow their job' (A7, A8) – which, according to them, does not mean that they do not enjoy living in the municipality. But because of lacking social ties (family), they would be willing to prioritize their job over living in this particular place.

Regarding the local population, respondents mention positively that there are other migrant communities in the city which made it easier for them to build a social network and receive support (A1, A3, A6). Residents are often described as 'nice' (*aardig*) and helpful. Respondents also appreciate the number of social activities in the city which create opportunities to interact with others (such as the buddy project or informal language activities), in addition to public spaces where people can meet.

Governance dimension

The living situation (housing), available activities and programs (support structure) as well as labor market conditions (employment) are also more broadly linked to **governance-related factors**. Here, not only local policies play a role, but also national policies which determine, for instance, the way asylum seekers and refugees are distributed across the country (via a national dispersal mechanism), the scope and content of the civic integration trajectory (under the Civic Integration Act) or the selective support and access given to certain categories of migrants. These policies and regulations, in turn, shape local lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

For instance, almost all respondents emphasize the negative experiences they had because of the existing dispersal mechanism in place: they were sent on a 'journey' through the country, having to move from one asylum seeker center to the next over a time span of multiple months to years. Respondents describe that they lost valuable time in the reception center because they were not allowed to work or study (A7, A8), it was an "empty and useless time" (A6), a "terrible time" (A7), marked by sitting still and *waiting* – for the outcome of the asylum procedure or for a house. This

experience affects some respondents also after their arrival in the locality. One respondent (A7) explains that because of the time lost while waiting, he "started the race later, I only started running now, I am way behind my peers. For example, Dutch people my age have already 6 years of work experience, I only have 9 months of work experience."

While the experience in the reception facilities was rather negative, being assigned to municipality A and eventually settling down here, appears to be satisfactory to most respondents. Within the city itself, most people seem to be satisfied with their living situation. Only one respondent (who lived in a smaller town nearby, but regularly went to locality A) mentions that the assigned social housing was very run-down, and they had to invest a lot of time and money to renovate the house. She feels more isolated than the other respondents who live closer the city center and/or the library.

Contrary to the rather satisfactory living situation, one point of concern was the labor market position and employment situation of some respondents. In the interview, one respondent who had worked with children in Syria and thus has work experience, but no diploma, posed the question: "Why can I not work here with all my experience? Why do I need a diploma? There are persons with a diploma, but without work experience. I have work experience." (A3) In the Netherlands, she has also worked as a volunteer in childcare, but without being paid; when trying to find a similar *paid* job, she received the reply that besides her insufficient language skills, she would also need a diploma. Other interviewees note similarly that they had to "start from zero" (A4) because their diploma was not recognized and/or because their Dutch language skills were not "good enough" (A1). Missing or not recognized diplomas and work experience as well as 'insufficient' Dutch language skills are seen as major obstacles in finding paid employment and may also be factors based on which people are discriminated against (A1). Two respondents who are already working full time both have a background in engineering and were able to find a job by themselves, without the support of local organizations (A7, A8). They proactively approached the companies and applied for jobs; for the other respondents who have a background in a more social/health-related profession, it appears to be more difficult to find paid employment, presumably because of the more prominent role of language in such professions (psychologist, teacher, nurse). Some respondents therefore started working in a field which does not correspond to their professional background/qualification, others are seemingly 'trapped' in their voluntary work in which their engagement is highly appreciated—but not in monetary terms (this 'voluntary work trap' is also discussed in the WP4 country report). The difficulty to find paid and/or qualified work was also mentioned by the language activity participants who shared some of their challenges after arriving in municipality A with the researcher.

Having to start working in the low paid sector – where language and/or a diploma seem less crucial – or doing voluntary work is often at odds with respondents' personal aspirations based on previous work experience, qualification and living standard.

One respondent (A4) explains that she had a good life in Iran, a well-paid and qualified job and it is very difficult for her that her previous experience is not valued and that she is confined to doing voluntary work, especially in the beginning:

> "In the first two years, I did not feel well, I did not like the Netherlands, and I said to my husband: if people come here who didn't have anything, then it is maybe easier for them to build a new life here, but if people had many things [in their old life], a good life, then it is really difficult. When I came to the Netherlands, people asked me: do you have a swimming pool in Iran? Do you know what that is? This was not nice for me; we had a swimming pool in our own house even. People assume that we are not '*netjes*', that we do not know these things; but on the contrary, a lot of people had a very good, luxurious life in Iran."

This point is also mentioned by other respondents who underline that it is very difficult to 'just' accept any (low paid) job if someone has a certain educational/professional background. It becomes apparent that (un)employment is throughout the interviews seen as crucial factor shaping people's integration experience and their everyday lives – both positively and negatively – as (un)employment can both be a driver of inclusion or exclusion (for instance, when certain sectors are inaccessible, or people are discriminated against due to their background). Here, respondents mention that the municipality and collaborating actors could and should pay more attention to people's qualifications, experiences and skills and support newcomers in finding more adequate work (A6).

Besides reception (as asylum seeker), housing and employment, governance related factors also include existing (local) policies in place and services offered to migrants. Importantly, in municipality A there is one local organization which combines social support for refugees, language learning, and help with finding employment under one roof. This is perceived as very helpful by some respondents because they have one or even two clear reference persons who are reliable and reachable if needed (A6). Yet, it is important to note that a person's legal status (related to form and purpose of entry in the Netherlands) plays an important role in accessing certain services. While social support (guidance in administrative matters) as well as civic integration courses (language) is accessible to recognized refugees, family migrants have more difficulties in finding affordable language courses and additional support – and persons without a legal status (rejected asylum seekers) have no access at all (mentioned by two participants in the language café). One respondent (A1) arrived four years ago from the Philippines and realized quickly that there are different rules and regulations in place:

> "We have different rules for refugees and for people who have to integrate because they are married or live with a Dutch man. We are given a five-year residence permit. We are free to work whatever we want to do. We are free to go to school. But we are not allowed to vote. So, we are just like a resident, but then we have also exceptions, like, we also sign a paper that we don't use some benefits (*toeslag*). I signed for that, I follow what I sign, I do not use welfare benefits, because later if you go for naturalization, it can affect your application. I want everything to be *netjes*. I also do not use a loan; I do everything by myself."

Both family migrants from the Philippines describe that language courses were not freely accessible for them; they were rather expensive which is why they also studied a lot at home. In contrast, the civic integration (language) courses used to be 'free' for refugees, that is, they received a loan from

DUO[19] from which they could pay for their integration course.[20] Yet, they were allowed to work immediately, while refugees usually have to wait for their official status first and are often encouraged or even expected to complete their civic integration trajectory before starting to work (A4, A6). Here, the system in place is also experienced as 'hindering' (labor market) integration because people are told to wait, learn the language first and start working then (A4, A8 & respondents in other localities).

Another point that is often mentioned relates to the more administrative side of integration. One respondent who arrived as an unaccompanied minor from Eritrea notes that many newcomers do not know how to deal with money and have therefore substantial debts. Here, crucial information and explanation is often missing which, again, has an impact on people's lived experiences of arrival and settlement in the locality (also mentioned by participants in the language café).

Discursive and political dimension

Moving away from this governance-related, administrative dimension influencing personal experiences in the locality, respondents' narratives show that their interactions, attitudes, and experiences are also significantly influenced by **political, public and media discourses** surrounding topics of migration and integration. Throughout interviews, respondents continuously refer implicitly and explicitly to dominant discourses and discursively constructed images about 'the refugee' or 'the Muslim migrant', thereby positioning themselves against these dominant narratives. They also explain that these images – related to their own background – shape their process of arrival and settlement as well as their personal interactions with neighbours or other local residents on a daily basis.

In a quote presented above, a respondent in locality A explains for instance that she does not like that people assume she had a bad life in Iran, that she is not '*netjes*' (neat, nice); she implicitly seems to allude here to the often-dominant idea that life in countries such as Iran is generally 'worse' than in the Netherlands and that people come to seek a better life and economic opportunities here. She clearly distances herself from this assumption and stresses that she did have a very good life in Iran, and she came to the Netherlands "for the freedom and safety of my children" (A4).

Another respondent (A7) underlines that existing images of Muslims or refugees are often created and shaped by the media, resulting in people holding certain (negative) attitudes towards them. He refers to an incident in Amsterdam where an old man told him: 'this country is now full of people like you', but adds that "I kind of understand his point of view" because of the dominance and persistence of certain media images about the Islam, so "when they see me, they probably ask themselves if I am the same because I am a Muslim". Contrary to these images, he describes himself as very open minded,

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[19] DUO stands for *Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs* (literally: Education Executive Service). DUO is a national agency/implementing body which executes educational laws and regulations on behalf of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science. DUO also implements the Civic Integration Act on behalf of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (see for more information: https://duo.nl/organisatie/organisatie/).

[20] Refugees still do not need to pay for their courses, but the system has changed with the implementation of the New Civic Integration Act in January 2022. Instead of receiving a 10.000€ loan, the costs for the language courses are now covered immediately by the state, reducing the responsibility for the individual.

also regarding other religions, and adds that "I like living and experiencing new things in life, I also listen to and play music", thereby contesting the negative image of Muslims constructed by the media. While he 'acknowledges' that "my life would have been so much easier if I was born here or with a European face or name", he also emphasizes that he would not renounce his faith to please others or to be accepted as this would equal losing his own identity.

The idea that people easily put you in a box (of the 'bad newcomer'), also seems to play a role in another respondent's notion of his proactive way of living. Throughout the interview, he stresses his positive thinking and proactive behavior and he also advices his friends to stay positive and proactive because "this brings benefits when they integrate with Dutch people and Dutch culture. […] If you are not pro-active and only sit at home, you will get homesick, nobody then sees you, you are transparent. […] If you are a negative thinker, no one will help you". He expresses how proud he is of his younger brother for behaving well and for being a good role model, shedding a positive light on newcomers. Contrary to his brother, there are some newcomers who "take more than they deserve". The respondent here seems to actively try and shape a positive narrative on newcomers, knowing about the potential negative images people may be holding against them (A6). Some respondents also mention incidents of racism and discrimination. For instance, a respondent form Eritrea shares that

> "Some people do not like that I am dark (*donker*). They do not like it. But yeah, I cannot do anything about this. […] Sometimes you hear them say that they do not like that there are foreigners here. Some people walk along the street and when they see you, they change the side of the street. But yeah, this can happen. There are racist people in every country." (A5)

People's (ethnic) backgrounds and appearances – on the basis of which they are often labelled – clearly influence daily interactions with others and has an impact on their own behaviour.

While most respondents report these personal incidents and observations and relate some of them to images shaped by media discourses, less references are made to the local political discourses or to the political orientation/establishment in the locality.

The political orientation of the locality appears to have an impact on the governance approach taken by the municipality (which also influences the support structure and the relation between municipal administration and newcomers, see WP3 for more details), but the overall political orientation appears to play a smaller role in personal interactions. Instead of explicitly mentioning the political orientation in the localities, respondents' statements are more broadly related to the Netherlands as a country and existing values (for example, equal opportunities for everyone, welcoming attitude of people, well-functioning legal system etc.). While not everyone is always friendly, respondents experience the support of volunteers as very helpful and beneficial. One respondent highlights here that he "was surprised about the society here" because he "didn't expect that people care so much here" (A8).

Social dimension (individual and group-related factors)

While respondents report similar experiences in the interviews (for example, with regards to language learning, finding qualified/paid employment or being confronted with one-sided images of (Muslim) refugees), their experiences also differ depending on various **individual factors**. The next section looks therefore more closely at factors related to the individual level and their impact on lived experiences, before touching upon the role of **social/societal, group-related factors** more broadly.

At the **individual level**, factors such as age, gender, educational background, ethnic origin, religion, or family situation play an important role in the process of arriving and settling down in the locality. Importantly, these factors may influence a person's experience in various, often intersecting ways.

For example, three **young respondents** (between 25 and 35 years old) with an **engineering background** have experienced their labour market integration very differently from other respondents who have, for instance, no degree/diploma and are already a bit older – two factors which influenced their ability to learn the Dutch language (quickly) and consequently find a paid job in a corresponding sector. In addition, the three respondents do not have a family and can therefore prioritize their career over other family-related responsibilities. Or as one put it in his own words: "I will follow my job" (A8), even if that means leaving the city. Although some of them feel like they have lost valuable time during their migration journey and are consequently 'only catching up now', they appear to be 'young enough' to start their career and follow their dreams in the Netherlands (A7, A8). Besides an easier entry into the labour market, respondents still note that it is not that 'easy to get in touch with young (!) Dutch people' (for example because most volunteers are old(er)).

The **ability to learn the Dutch language** (fast), is described as crucial for a person's integration by both interviewees and language activity participants; it is not only important to find a job, to follow an educational program, but also to communicate and build relationships with others, for example with colleagues, neighbours, or teachers. Language thus can be a main driver for in- and exclusion. One respondent observes that it is easy to find a job where only English is required, but this still "keeps you separate from everyone because people like to speak Dutch in their breaks" (A6). Another one states:

> "It's not so hard to talk to Dutch people if you speak Dutch well; but some [newcomers] get scared because they don't speak the language well. They do not like to speak because their language is not perfect. You have to talk more so you get better. But they are insecure." (A5)

The respondent from Iran explains that she didn't know how to interact with her children's teachers or how she could help her children with their schoolwork. She is worried because her children will grow up here and she may not be able to understand what they are going through, also beyond their school trajectory: "I have to take care of my children; here, children are free, but they may start smoking cigarettes, this is why I have to take care of them" (A4). Because of the importance of language, she also consciously decided to send her children to a school with primarily Dutch children (without migration background): "I think this is better, I do not speak well, my husband does not speak well, but my children should speak it better, I want them to go to university etc." Moreover, she did not like that in the previous school there were many Muslim students from Turkey and Morocco. She emphasizes

that it is not per se about them being Muslims (she does not identify as Christian or religious), but for her children, she believes it is important to be more in touch with Dutch children. Her experience in Iran and the enforced rules (she had to wear a headscarf and was not allowed to wear short skirts), seems to influence her attitude in the Netherlands as well (towards people from a 'Muslim country').

Here, it also becomes apparent that the respondent's **family situation** – being married and a mother of two daughters – shapes her everyday life; for her, it appears to be important to learn the language for her children and she is concerned about her children's future. Importantly, she would also like to work, but her professional background (in psychology) and her age make it – according to the respondent – more difficult for her to find a job.

While language skills are crucial for communication, respondents also highlight that perceived **cultural differences** and – relatedly – missing cultural capital, that is, knowledge of social norms and 'unwritten rules', has led to insecurities in the ways they deal with Dutch people. A respondent from Syria (A3) describes that she barely sees Dutch people "just talking to each other" and when she tries to invite someone to her house, the person often declines, saying there is no time. Overall, she has not had bad experiences with people in the Netherlands, but she sees that Dutch people have their own circle; her interaction with her Dutch neighbor is usually limited to "Hello, how are you?". The respondent from Iran (A4) similarly explains that it takes a long time until Dutch people accept an invitation. It is therefore very difficult to "make contact with Dutch people". She also refers to one occasion where her neighbor came with her husband and they greeted them with hugs and kisses, but then learned that here this is not common and so they apologized. In this context, a young man from Eritrea (A5) stresses that it is important to have 'local Dutch friends' because they "know how it works here".

Here, a person's ethnic background and their unfamiliarity with 'ways of living and doing in the Netherlands' may impact their ability and confidence to 'make contact' with Dutch people and potentially lead to readjustment of expectations and actions.

Interestingly, these cultural differences were also discussed by local volunteers (primarily without migration background) during their get-together organized by a local organization. Some volunteers reported that sometimes their newcomer-buddy would not show up or be late to a previously made appointment which made them feel disappointed, irritated, or rather clueless on how to best deal and/or interpret the situation (similar insecurities described above by respondents). Like the respondents, the volunteers also mentioned language as one of the main challenges or even barrier for communication and interaction, especially when a person does not speak any other common languages such as English. It was often pointed out that the volunteers had to take the first step when scheduling a meeting which left some of them wondering if the newcomers were even interested.

Some volunteers showed understanding for the situation of some of their buddies because of what they have been through as refugees and tried to understand why they were acting in a certain way. They reflected on their own privileged positionality as 'white Dutch person' (*witte Nederlander*) and explained misunderstandings or challenges by referring to cultural differences between 'them' (the newcomers) and 'us'; for example, they described Dutch people as being very direct and used to

making appointments. At the same time, some also formulated (explicitly or implicitly) expectations towards the newcomers. One woman stated for example that "they have lived here for a while now and should know how it works here". And another man noted that "my buddy always calls me 'Mr. XY', but I just want to be called by my first name". Importantly, interactions described in this setting refer primarily to personal interactions between the two buddies; volunteers did not necessarily speak about broader political issues related to migration or integration in the city.

In this context – and also related to language learning – a person's **duration of stay** in the municipality plays an important role. Someone who has just recently arrived has different thoughts, worries or experiences compared to someone who has lived for a longer time in the city. This temporal aspect becomes apparent in people's narratives where many describe that living in the Netherlands "has become easier over time" (A4) because they now speak the language better, have found a job, know more people in the city or more generally have a better sense of 'how it works' here (A1, A2, A4, A5). Looking back at the past years, the time during the pandemic is often referred to as especially difficult because there were fewer social activities, and it was more challenging to meet people.

This latter aspect is closely related to **social, group-related factors** such as the presence of a personal support network or active civil society or religious organizations in a locality. Both a personal support network (including family and friends from their 'own ethnic community' (A2, A5, A6), volunteers or neighbors) as well as social support provided by local organizations (library, buddy project or language café) are seen as crucial to meet people, find friends and improve one's language (A1-4, A6, A7). One respondent from the Philippines (A1) describes how the Filipino community helps her: "We Filipinos have a group in Facebook, we have people with more experience, who have lived here for a long time and who know how things work. They give answers via Facebook, this is really good." Some respondents stress the importance of having interactions with other newcomers, calling the other people in their language activity their 'family'. And others highlight how crucial it is to have Dutch friends to learn the language and to learn more about the Netherlands.

Brief summary of main insights

In locality A, where the local population was generally perceived as friendly towards newcomers and where also no protests against asylum seeker accommodations had occurred, our interviews and observations point to a rather high satisfaction of refugees with housing as well as the social and language support that is provided by one organization. However, we encountered much frustration with the labor market situation, given that many respondents feel either trapped in voluntary work or in work below their qualification level. This job situation means these respondents experience a mismatch between the status they had in their home country with the societal status they assume now, and it questions and frustrates their personal aspirations for their future in the Netherlands.

3.2.2 Municipality B (small town, South Holland)

Municipality B lies in the province South Holland in the West of the Netherlands and has approximately 50.000 to 80.000 residents. Less than 15% of the **local population** has a 'migration background', of which less than 6% are categorized as 'non-Western'. The share of foreign residents has increased in the last 10 years by approximately 3% (almost 2% for 'non-Western'). These numbers are significantly lower than the national average where almost 25% of the population has a migration background (of which 14% are categorized as 'non-Western'). Since 2013, approximately 350 adult recognized refugees reside in the municipality. On average, 30 to 40 refugees arrive on a yearly basis (policy document, 2019). The number of arrivals of both asylum seekers and refugees in the municipality changes, sometimes significantly, in perceived 'crisis' situation such as the one in 2015/2016 when the local reception center hosted almost double the amount of people it usually does. Currently, the municipality has one reception center where approximately 175 people from Ukraine are staying (temporarily). Additionally, approximately 60 Ukrainians stay with host families (November 2022).

Overall, the local population has grown over the past 10 years (by more than 5%) and has aged significantly (also compared to the national average) (CBS).

In terms of economics, the unemployment level is significantly lower than the national average, while the average national income is somewhat higher than the local average (Economische Agenda 2015, p. 47; CBS). Based on data collected in the survey, most respondents see an improvement in the economic situation from "rather good" in 2014 to "very good" in 2021, with only one respondent describing the economic situation as "rather bad" in 2021 (survey data). There are relatively few highly educated residents and illiteracy is seen as a challenge, especially among those "who left school early and started working as a fisherman or in construction" (N-B-8; N-B-5; Economische Agenda 2015). Important economic sectors comprise agriculture, the food and metal industry, and tourism. The respondent of the service provider responsible for labor market integration highlights that "there are no big tech or corporate (service) companies", which is sometimes seen as challenging for the integration of highly skilled migrants. According to the respondent, there are many jobs in the low skilled sector (especially in the flower industry) which are not suitable for persons with a university degree who often have different ambitions. When comparing the labor market participation of persons with a Dutch background to persons with a 'non-Western migration background' it becomes apparent that the latter is on average less often employed: for example, in 2020, almost 73% of persons with a Dutch background were working, compared to 62% of persons with a 'non-Western migration background'. When only considering recognized refugees, the percentage is even lower – among the persons who arrived in the municipality in 2018, approximately 37% were employed in 2021. Of all employed refugees, more than half do not work full time or have multiple jobs; 40% do (almost) have a full-time job (more than 0,8fte; Divosa/Stimulansz, 2021).

Similar to the rest of the country, the **local housing market** in the small town is characterized by an "increasing scarcity and persistently high demand for housing" (Woonagenda 2020-2024, p. 10). Approximately 25% of the available rental housing is social housing (slightly below average; BZK datawonen, 2020). Due to the national dispersal mechanism in place, refugees are allocated in social housing provided by the municipality. Similar to municipality A, due to the uneven distribution of social

housing in the city, there is also an uneven spatial concentration of refugees/migrants in certain neighborhoods. Respondents interviewed for WP3 and WP4 described accordingly that refugees typically live in neighborhoods characterized by "*torenflats*" (residential towers), social housing and a higher share of people with a 'migration background', resulting in spatial segregation and 'lack of mixing' between old and new residents (N-B-1, N-B-3, N-B-4). The local asylum seeker center is located outside of the city center and seems rather difficult to access (the researcher rented a bike to get there because it would have taken double the time to reach the center by bus).

The political orientation in the municipality can be described as "center or center-right" with the majority of the seats in the municipal council being held by Christian democratic parties (at the time of the research). In almost all interviews, municipality B is described as Christian municipality – an aspect that seems to play an important role in the self-identification of the residents.

RELEVANT INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE LOCALITY

Regarding relevant infrastructure in the small town, respondents positively pointed out the locality's proximity to a bigger university city and to the sea, but also mentioned that the town is 'only' connected by a bus – and not by a train – which impacts people's mobility and the town's accessibility (this is also mentioned in the focus groups). This point is similarly reflected in the researcher's fieldwork experience where municipality B was more difficult to reach compared to locality A (although still fairly accessible with busses running very frequently to a nearby city with a train station). In terms of integration-related infrastructure, there appear to be a few locations where newcomers meet regularly (including the local public library, the local welfare organization and neighbourhood houses), but according to some respondents, there are not sufficient activities (for women) and public spaces such as parks for people to get together and to, for example, celebrate important religious festivals or do a picnic. Some respondents therefore often go to bigger cities nearby to meet their friends and families for a celebration (in bigger groups). Many interviewees also referred to the local swimming pool and sports associations as important spaces to spend time and to interact with others (especially for their children). Respondents did not mention any difficulties regarding the diversity of educational institutions such as primary schools (for their children), but most respondents often had to travel to other towns/cities for their Dutch language courses. Finally, there are various shopping possibilities, including a Turkish supermarket, and a small shopping *passage* in one of the neighborhoods where many migrants and newcomers live.

ORGANIZATIONAL LANDSCAPE IN THE LOCALITY

The main *formal* actor in the organizational landscape in the small town is a local **non-profit welfare organization** which functions as the first contact point for refugees in the city and supports them during their civic integration trajectory over a duration of three years. The local welfare organization receives funding from the municipality to supports refugees in all administrative tasks and the organization's staff meets the newcomers regularly to monitor and discuss their progress (N-B-1, N-B-4). Importantly, the local welfare organization is responsible for the 'social domain/welfare' more generally, refugee assistance being one of its tasks. The welfare organization is also responsible for the different neighborhood houses where various activities take place, such as bike lessons for women or cooking evenings with long-term residents and newcomers.

Regarding housing, the municipality has made a performance agreement with the **local housing corporation** to implement the legal task of finding accommodation for refugees who are linked to the locality. The municipality also collaborates with a service provider that is part of a larger regional service point for employers (*werkgeverservicepunt*).[21] The **service provider** helps refugees with finding employment. Importantly, the service provider offers their support to all residents who receive welfare benefits and/or have a 'distance to the labor market'. Since refugees are (in most cases) part of this target group, they are sent via the municipal administration to the regional service provider in order to be re-integrated into the labor market (N-B-2, B-B-6).

A crucial organization is the local **library** which offers informal language support and education as well as practical help and information to all migrants (not just refugees) (N-B-5). The library fulfils an important social function by offering a space where people can interact with each other. The library was mentioned by almost all respondents as a nice place to meet and based on participant observation conducted in the library it indeed appeared to be a place where many different people come together to work, study, spend time and interact. The library offers language activities multiple times a week and half of its surface it reserved for such activities. Based on the high number of participants in each activity (between 15-30 people), it seems that people (both newcomers, but also long-term residents with migration background) appreciate the library's support/services.

PRO/ANTI MIGRANT MOBILIZATION

In the small town in South Holland, locals' attitudes towards post-2014 migrants are 'ambiguous' and split between welcoming (mobilization of volunteers) and hostile/suspicious. According to the survey data, the local attitude towards migrants is between "rather negative" (3), "neutral" (2) and "rather positive" (2) (7 respondents). In 2015/2016, the hostile attitude was visibly expressed in protests against the arrival of newcomers. While most respondents agree that the protests have 'quieted down' (N-B-7), social media has now become the platform where individuals express their concerns or post racist comments (N-B-1, N-B-2). The respondent from the local library notes moreover that some regular visitors were complaining because half of the surface is nowadays used to offer language lessons for migrants. Like municipality A, another common concern relates to the shortage of housing and the priority that is given to refugees by the local housing corporation.

Multiple respondents interviewed for WP3 and WP4 emphasize that certain narratives about the reception center and foreigners play an important role in shaping residents' perceptions. Stories misleadingly depict migrants as a threat or thieves (N-B-2, N-B-7, N-B-8). On a more personal level, some respondents mentioned experiences of discrimination and racism, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic where foreigners were seen as 'carriers of the disease' (N-B-4, N-B-12).

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[21] The Netherlands is divided into 35 'labor market regions.' Every region has a public WerkgeversServicepunt (WSP) ('Employers Service Point'), a collaboration of municipalities, the UWV (Employee Insurance Agency), educational institutions, knowledge centers and other parties. The goal of the WSP is to help jobseekers who are not immediately employable, such as older unemployed persons or refugees, to find work more quickly.

Importantly, there is also a group of people who has mobilized the Christian community in the locality and who has set up an association to help and support (rejected) asylum seekers. Other respondents also mentioned that "people are always ready to help and are cooperative" (N-B-12) and, especially in the library, there are many volunteers providing support as language coaches or during group language lessons (N-B-5, N-B-11, N-B-12).

The 'Christian identity' of the locality, combined with its relatively small size, is interpreted in two different ways: for some, it explains the commitment of residents to help refugees (importance of charity); for others, it shows why there is a distance between newcomers and long-term residents as the local tight-knit community is seen as potential barrier to integration (N-B-2, N-B-5, N-B-8, N-B-11).

DESCRIPTION OF CONDUCTED FIELDWORK IN LOCALITY B

Participant observation in locality B included various site visits, including the local asylum seeker center, a neighborhood house, the beach and a Turkish supermarket, and participation in a language activity for women and in various language courses offered by the library. For interviews and the focus group discussion, the researcher also spent time at the local welfare organization. The researcher decided to visit the library as well as the neighborhood where the library is located because they both were mentioned as places where a lot of post-2014 migrants come together and live, respectively. The library is located next to residential towers (with a lot of social housing) and a shopping *passage* with a mixture of supermarkets, bakeries, and other stores. One of the neighborhood houses and a church are easily reachable from the library and there is also a bus stop nearby. The researcher noticed quite a stark contrast between the residential towers on the one side of the library and the smaller houses on the other side of the street. While there is no public space in front of the library, the library itself appears to be one of the main places of encounter for newcomers. During the various activities offered to migrants, the researcher noticed a high interest in such activities (the researcher attended four activities and every time all spots were taken, and new chairs had to be added to the table). In informal conversations with volunteers, the researcher also learned that most activities are very popular and experienced as very helpful – both in terms of language learning but also for the provision of information and to meet others and make new friends (this impression was also confirmed in the interviews). The researcher also visited the beach, which is a place where many people come together, including residents, visitors from surrounding municipalities and tourists; and attended a language get-together for women which is organized by a person who also works for the library and takes place in a school where many newcomers send their children to. The researcher was invited to join the language activity by the coordinator of the initiative to meet potential interviewees and to experience the meetings that are regularly attended by the women. This gave the researcher the opportunity to experience in which setting newcomers come together and what their experiences are. Moreover, the researcher learned how certain issues are negotiated among the women who arrived in the locality in the past years, seeing similarities, but also differences among the participants. Finally, during the field visit of the local asylum seeker center, the researcher was able to gain a first impression of asylum seekers' living conditions in the small town. The observations and conversation during these field visits complement the information gained through the in-depth interviews conducted in locality B.

In total, eight **interviews** were conducted in locality B. The sample of research participants comprises six women and two men; seven respondents have a refugee status; one respondent had her asylum claim rejected. Some respondents have arrived very recently in municipality B (less than one years ago), others have lived in the city for up to five years. The table provides an overview of the respondents and their personal characteristics.

No	Country of origin	Age	Gender	Legal status	Family status	Level of education	Employment in locality	Residence in country/in locality
1	Syria	25-35	Female	Refugee	Two children	Primary school	Voluntary work	7 years/ 5 years
2	Iran	20-25	Female	Refugee	Single	University	No employment	4 years/ 6 months
3	Yemen	25-35	Male	Refugee	Married	University PhD	Voluntary work	1 year/ 6 months
4	Syria	35-45	Male	Refugee	Married	University	No employment	2 years/ 6 months
5	Syria	25-35	Female	Refugee	Married, two children	University	Voluntary work	2 years/ 1 year
6	Afghanistan	35-45	Female	Refugee	Married, three children	University	Voluntary work	18 years/ 7 years as rejected asylum seeker; 4 years as recognized refugee
7	Libya	25-35	Female	Refugee	Married, three children	University	Voluntary work, follows education	7 years/ 4 years
8	Eritrea	25-35	Female	Rejected	Two children	High school	No work permit	5 years/ 2 years

Table 5: Respondent overview Locality B

The respondents were selected primarily because of their recent arrival in municipality B as 'refugee' (after 2014). The researcher met one respondent in the library and two respondents in the previously mentioned language activity in the local school; she was referred to five respondents via the local welfare organization. The sample thus comprises persons who are already actively involved in existing activities and programs (thus linked to an organization or a volunteer) and whose experiences may therefore differ (significantly) from persons who are not linked to any organization. Moreover, the sample is rather biased in terms of respondents' educational background with six of out eight respondents holding a university degree which – as will be shown below – certainly impacts their lived

experiences and their personal (career) aspirations. The high percentage of people with a university degree in the sample can be explained with the fact that the contact person at the welfare organization (through which most respondents were found) tried to find respondents who could either speak Dutch or English; additionally, it seems as if many people with a highly skilled background indicated that they would like to live in this area because of the town's proximity to a university. Finally, it is important to note that some respondents have only lived for a rather short amount of time in the municipality, which is an important reason for why they have not found paid employment yet. Three interviews were conducted in the public library; five interviews were conducted in the local welfare organization.

The **focus group discussion** in locality B took place in a room in the local welfare organization and lasted almost three hours. Food and hot and cold beverages were provided. The discussion was attended by twelve participants, some of which were also interviewed individually (four out of twelve). Some respondents were found via the local welfare organization, others via personal contacts or during one of the researcher's field visits in a local neighborhoods house. Two respondents can be described as long-term residents without migration background (both being born and raised in locality B), one as long-term resident from Somalia; she attended the focus group discussion with her two daughters (teenagers) who were born in the Netherlands. The other nine participants arrived in the past years from various countries, including Iran, Yemen, Syria, and Afghanistan. The group of participants consisted of six women and six men; two married couples attended the focus group together. The participants' age ranged from mid-twenty to above 60. The discussion was moderated by two researchers in English and Dutch; one participant helped to translate from Farsi to Dutch.

Overall, the focus group discussion in locality B was characterized by a positive and relaxed atmosphere. People seemed genuinely interested in learning from each other and were willing to share their own experiences and perspectives on different topics. When talking about cultural differences (especially regarding hospitality and food), people also shared some funny stories which resonated with other participants' experiences and sparked a lot of laughter. Besides these lighter stories, people also talked about experiences of racism and exclusion or insecurities regarding the (bureaucratic) system in place (dealing with money and insurance). At the end of the focus group, some participants stayed and engaged in conversations with each other and showed interested in the welfare organization's activities and volunteering opportunities.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS, INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDES, AND MIGRANTS' EXPERIENCES

This section looks at the various dimensions that influence and shape lived experiences of in- and exclusion and social interaction between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents as well as reciprocal attitudes. The analysis and discussion are primarily based on eight in-depth interviews that were conducted in municipality B, complemented by some more general observations during the various field visits as well as (if needed) interviews conducted for WP3 and WP4.

Spatial dimension

First, the **spatial character of the locality** is evaluated ambiguously by our respondents: most indicate being satisfied with their living situation in the small town in South Holland. As previously mentioned, they like the proximity to a bigger city in the region (15 to 20 minutes by bus), while still living in a

'beautiful, small, and calm place' close to the sea (B1, B4, B6). According to one respondent from Yemen (B3), the small town "is the most beautiful municipality I have ever seen […] and my favorite place is the sea." The locality is moreover often described as a good place to raise children because it is quieter compared to bigger cities such as Rotterdam. While most respondents would like to stay in the small town for these (and other) reasons, two respondents see their situation differently. A young woman from Iran explains that the locality is too clam and small for her, she would prefer living in a bigger city with more young people and a university. One respondent (B5) from Syria states that the municipality is a good place for now, but she believes Rotterdam, Amsterdam or Utrecht would offer her more job opportunities. Because of the smaller size of the municipality, most respondents have to travel to other towns/cities to follow language courses or an education/qualification which is not only difficult due to the public transport system in place (only busses), but also because traveling with public transport can be quite expensive (B7). Similar themes regarding the size of the city and issues related to public transport were also discussed in the focus group.

With regards to the **local population**, respondents seem divided. Some respondents point out that "people are very nice and friendly and accept each other" (B3; B1, B4), others note that the local community is "separated, not very well mixed" (B6). Over the past years, more foreigners have arrived in the town and "not everyone is happy with that. […] not everyone is here with open arms or laughing." (B6) Another respondent states: "Many people talk to me about this topic, people in [name of locality] do not like making contact with other people from other countries or cities. Maybe because it is a small town. People know each other. People who come later, they stay foreigners." (B5) During the women's language activity as well as the focus group discussion, this perceived separation between newcomers and long-term (Dutch) residents and the difficulties to get in touch with each other was also discussed among participants. Some explained these observations with the rather white, homogeneous Christian resident population who is not used to foreigners. More generally, people mentioned that it is easier to find friends who are already older (and volunteers) than to get in touch with younger people. This impression was also shared by one of the long-term residents who explained that he grew up in the town and met his friends rather naturally in school or in sports clubs which is why he can imagine that making friends in the locality can be rather difficult for newcomers.

While respondents do not explicitly mention a bigger 'migrant community' in the locality, they underline the importance of having friends with whom they can, for instance, speak Arabic and to whom they turn for help. Or as one respondent put it: "If I only talk to *Nederlanders*, I learn the language, I gain new insights, but for my spirit and social feeling, to feel comfortable, it is nice to chat with people like you" (N-B-12).

Governance dimension

Besides the spatial dimension and local population, **governance-related factors** also influence people's experiences, attitudes, and interactions. Like in municipality A, both national policies and local policies shape local experiences of inclusion and exclusion in municipality B.

For example, the national dispersal mechanism in place affects people's arrival and settlement process in the country. Similar to respondents in locality A, almost all respondents in municipality B emphasize

the negative experiences they had while being moved from one asylum seeker center to the next over a time span of multiple months to years. When thinking of her first four years in the Netherlands, a young woman from Iran (B2) notes: "They transferred us to lots of asylum seeker centers, I changed more than seven cities. […] It was terrible because I lost my golden age. I studied in my country, but here they did not allow us to study at the university or learn Dutch or something like that." Other respondents describe likewise that they lost time while waiting for their asylum application to be approved; this experience was even more pronounced for one of the respondents whose asylum claim was initially rejected and who had to wait with her family for more than ten years to finally get her residence permit. Another respondent currently lives with her two children in the local asylum seeker center, but with a rejected asylum claim. While she is currently not facing the threat of deportation (because her children are under 18 and the situation in Eritrea does not allow the authorities to send them back), she lives in a continuous limbo state without the possibility to work, follow language courses or continue an education. Her status as rejected asylum seeker prevents her from accessing locally provided services (such as social support) and rights (to work); conversely, her children are allowed to join the local primary school. Here, the migration/return policy in place affects the respondent's 'integrability' and creates a situation of (partial) exclusion in the locality.

Besides experiencing the long stays in various reception facilities as having a delaying effect on integration, some respondents also point out that the delay in issuing their application for family reunification resulted in feelings of anger and loneliness (B3, B4):

> "I am very angry. I am alone in my house and that is bad, very, very bad. When I lived in the AZC (asylum seeker center) my friend was with me in my room. When someone is sick, the other person makes tea or something. But when the person is alone it is very, very, very bad. That is a very bad thing in the Netherlands. The IND [national immigration authority] spends so much time to make a decision. And that is very bad when the person lives alone." (B4)

While the experience in the reception facilities was rather negative, being assigned to municipality B and eventually settling down here, appears to be rather satisfactory for approximately half of the respondents. One respondent from Yemen underlines that after his arrival in the town, "I feel stable, I got a flat, more privacy, I feel human again." (B3) Within the town itself, they seem to be satisfied with their living situation (housing). A few respondents describe their apartments as rather small (B4) or not having a garden where children can play (B7). One respondent declares that she and her family initially wanted to live in a different municipality (closer to her family), but their wish was not taken into account when being assigned to the municipality.

Another common thread discussed in almost all interviews as well as during the women's language activity was the **employment situation** which – contrary to the living situation – appeared to be one of the main experienced challenges with regards to people's attempt to build a new life in the locality. Throughout the conversations, respondents mention the difficulty to find paid and – importantly – qualified employed. Most respondents have a university degree and often significant work experience but are nonetheless not able to find a job because their qualification is often not recognized. Some also report that the local municipal administration tried to 'push' them towards working in any sector:

"The municipality, […] all the time they call me and tell me that I have to go to work. I do not want to work in the Jumbo or in the Albert Heijn [two supermarkets]. I studied, I am an architect, I do not want to work in these places. I have knowledge. I can do lots of things. People working in the Jumbo or the AH, they cannot do these things. All the time they are nagging me, 'we will cancel your money'." (B2)

The young woman's account (B2) is similarly reflected in the stories of a teacher from Libya and a business manager from Syria who describe their experiences with the municipality and the local service provider as follows:

"I went to the appointment with [the regional service provider], I brought all my papers, my diploma, and certificates and then we went to a hotel nearby. I thought this is where the appointment was. They explained everything and then suddenly the woman from the municipality said: 'You can work here, either cleaning or at the reception'. And I thought, I came here to find work, but not to start working immediately. She said: 'no, but you have to work, come, sign the contract.'" (B7)

"I have a real problem with [the regional service provider], it is very difficult to talk to them because they want to place me anywhere. But I worked, I invested a lot of time, I had a child, and I studied and worked in Syria and Lebanon, and now I must work as a cleaner? I deserve a chance. They won't give me the chance. 'You have to work'. […] Every time I have a talk with them, I stress the entire day. […] This is also a problem with the municipality. They say, if you start studying, then we will stop the *uitkering*. Yes, I can work in production, but then I earn less than my *uitkering*. But two years of studying with pre-master and master, then I can stop the *uitkering*. And this is good for you and for me. I want a good life for my children. I want a good job. I have experience. It is difficult for me to talk about this. This topic makes me nervous and stresses me. My contact person at [the regional service provider] wants to talk to me every week and tells me I must work – but not voluntary work. 'You have to work'. But okay, I do not want to work 'outside' of my diploma. I want to work with my diploma. […] This is what I think: they want all foreigners in production, in cleaning jobs, in the restaurants. Preventing people from studying is good for them, but not for me." (B5)

All three respondents are very clearly affected by the municipality's way of addressing their employment situation; instead of feeling supported and valued, they appear disappointed, agitated, and stressed by the pressure to just accept 'any job' and to potentially see their social welfare benefits reduced. They all acknowledge that they would like to work and 'give something back' to the municipality, but not only on their terms. From a long-term perspective they argue that continuing their studies and/or finding qualified employment would potentially benefit all as it would allow them to stop their benefits and earn more money later on.

Challenges to find employment are here also related to the smaller size as well as the economic profile of the municipality with few employment opportunities in bigger (tech) companies and research institutions, but instead in the low-paid sector (production, supermarket, cleaning jobs).

While language is also discussed as a challenge, the 'push' towards undesired work is here more prominently discussed than in municipality A.

Besides reception, housing and employment, governance-related factors also include existing (local) policies in place and services offered to migrants. Importantly, in municipality B there is one local welfare organization which offers social support to refugees. Contrary to the regional service provider, the local welfare organization is perceived as very helpful. One respondent from Yemen explains:

> "The best thing is [name of welfare organization], the best thing I have ever seen. As a refugee, when you arrive, you are like a blind man, you cannot see anything, but they guide you. They organized everything for me. It's a new system in the Netherlands, everything is new, is totally different. I am super grateful for them." (B3)

However, respondents also point out that some administrative aspects remain unclear and that the number of letters people receive can be overwhelming. In the asylum seeker center, everything was taken care of, and 'suddenly' they have to do everything themselves – without knowing how the system works (for example, in terms of paying rent, electricity etc.) (B2, B5).

Yet, it is again important to note that a person's legal status (related to form and purpose of entry in the Netherlands) plays an important role in accessing certain services. While social support (guidance in administrative matters) as well as civic integration courses (language) is accessible to recognized refugees, rejected asylum seekers do not have access to language courses and additional support (B8). The library's activities are, however, accessible to the respondent whose asylum claim was rejected, and she regularly participates in the women's get together to improve her language. Consequently, the library appears to be a crucial actor in the local support structure, offering all newcomers the opportunity to participate in their program and to meet others.

Discursive and political dimension

Moving away from this governance-related, administrative dimension influencing personal experiences in the locality, respondents' narratives show that their interactions, attitudes, and experiences are also significantly influenced by **political, public and media discourses** surrounding topics of migration and integration. Similar to respondents in municipality A, some respondents in the small town refer in their narratives to the presence of certain dominant images and narratives about refugees in general and Muslims in particular. One respondent (B3) explains his uneasiness with the term or the category 'asylum seekers': "To be honest with you, I never imagined in my life that I would apply for asylum. Never. So, the most difficult sentence for me was, 'I want to apply for asylum'. It is very, very difficult for me to remember this moment. But it is out of my control. I cannot go back to Yemen." Another woman from Eritrea (B8) similarly explains that "most people don't have a positive image of the asylum seeker center, they hear negative things." But when people visited the center

during the open day "they were really surprised. People hear a lot of bad things about what is happening in the asylum seeker center, they think people living there are not nice, but most people are nice, and we showed them that we can dance and make our own food."

Another respondent from Libya describes similarly that she actively tries to change people's mind with her actions, knowing that refugees or foreigners are not always viewed positively: "When someone sees me as a foreign woman laughing, being nice, maybe they see that these people (*buitenlanders*) are good; they see, these people are normal, they are nice." For her, it is important to be open, to participate and to learn from each other; for example, "during Ramadan, I invited a Dutch friend. For Christmas, I also brought a gift. For Halloween, I stood downstairs to give '*snoepjes'* to children." (B7)

Two female respondents from Afghanistan (B6) and Syria (B5) express concerns that due to their background their children may always be seen as foreigners and may have difficulties, for example to find a job, because they are not seen as 'real Dutch persons'. One respondent (B5) underlines: "I want my children to be happy with others and to be integrated in the community. I do not want them to feel like they are *buitenlanders* and that people do not want us here." The other (B6) states similarly:

> "If I get treated as a foreigner, I understand. It is painful, but I can accept it. But for children who were born here and have never seen Afghanistan, they only know that their parents come from Afghanistan, they have no other country. For these children it would be very difficult."

She explains further that she herself is "*heel netjes*" (very nice/neat) and her children as well; they follow the rules, stop at a red light, or help old neighbors with the shopping bags, they go to school, play football, and have a side job in the supermarket – all things that 'normal Dutch people' do. If they were treated as foreigners and not equally "it would be like a slap in their face that would break them".

All four women show awareness of certain attitudes towards migrants and challenges migrants are confronted with – in both the Netherlands more generally and the small town in particular. This awareness does not only influence their own behavior and interaction (by actively following the rules or showing that foreigners are 'normal'), but it also impacts how they see their children's future. The respondents do not explicitly refer to the political climate in the small town, but state more generally that people do not seem 'too happy' about all the foreigners in the municipality. As previously mentioned, it appears rather difficult to 'make contact with locals' and be seen as part of the community which in itself is often described (also by WP3 and WP4 respondents) as rather fragmented.

In some interviews, people also mention positive aspects about the Netherlands or Dutch people more broadly (welcoming attitude, equal chances, less racism) and report positive interactions with neighbors or other parents in the small town. Yet, compared to municipality A, the theme of the rather closed-off community (potentially) holding negative or suspicious attitudes towards newcomers was discussed more prominently here (also in the focus group and during the women's language activity). Nonetheless, respondents also emphasize the support given by local volunteers as well as the library's and welfare organization's staff.

Social dimension (individual and group-related factors)

While respondents report similar experiences/difficulties in the interviews (for example, with regards to finding qualified/paid employment), their experiences also differ depending on various **individual factors** that shape interaction and experiences of in- and exclusion.

At the **individual level**, factors such as a person's age, gender, educational background, ethnic origin, religion, or family situation play an important role in the process of arriving and settling down in the locality. Importantly, these factors may influence a person's experience in various, intersecting ways.

For example, for younger persons without family and the aspiration to continue their studies, the small town seems less attractive and offers less opportunities compared to those with family who appreciate the safety and calmness of the small town and would therefore like to stay. **Age** also plays a role in accessing certain services because people who are older than 30 years old have more difficulties to continue their education and to receive financial support for that.[22]

Equally, if not more important, appears to be the **educational background** which fuels personal aspirations and expectations with regards to finding employment. While one respondent who did not work in Syria seems currently content to focus on raising her children (she does not know yet what she would like to do professionally), other respondents emphasize the importance for them to find work as quickly as possible; and then not just 'any' type of work, but work that corresponds with their background. Here, the small town and its socio-economic conditions are experienced as a challenge.

Moreover, **language** acts as an additional barrier because some jobs and educational programs are only accessible with certain language skills. Similar to respondents in municipality A, language is seen as important to find work, but also to speak to people and build a social network.

Another important factor appears to be the **family situation** which is not only a reason to stay in the locality, but it also influences people's everyday lives significantly. Most respondents with children point out that having children helped them to get in touch with others because they would meet other parents in school, in the swimming pool or at a local sports association. Due to their children, they felt often more involved in the community life; this also applied to the women who attend the weekly language get-together at their children's local school. Moreover, being a role model for their children appears to be an important driver for respondents to learn Dutch and find a job to not only provide their children a better future, but to also show them that working and 'doing something good' is important (B5, B6, B8). B8, who is not allowed to work, stresses that she puts a lot of effort in dressing up, looking nice and being happy so that she can be a good example for her children:

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[22] Refugees between 18 and 30 years old who follow a course or are about to start one can usually apply for a financial contribution or a student grant from DUO. Refugees between 30 and 56 years old may be eligible, but the requirements are more difficult to meet. (https://duo.nl/particulier/studiefinanciering/voorwaarden.jsp.)

"I push myself every day, I need to be happy for my kids. People always ask me why do you dress up? But I live for them, I live for my children, I have to be strong, my kids have no one else. They're happy when they see me being happy and good. I need good energy for my kids. Love and support are more important than money."

Some respondents also underline the importance for their children to get in touch with Dutch kids. Similar to a respondent in municipality A, a mother from Libya very consciously chose to send her children to a school with Dutch children because this is, according to her, more beneficial for her children and their language development; she speaks Arabic at home, this is why she wants her children to speak Dutch outside/in school.

Other individual factors include a person's **duration of stay** – respondents who arrived recently have different experiences and expectations because they for instance only just started to learn the language; **country of origin and legal status** – recognized refugees have substantially more access to services and resources compared to rejected asylum seekers; or **mental health** – some respondents mention that due to their difficult personal situation and experiences in the past/in their home country, they struggled with mental health issues which prevented them from 'fully participating'. This latter aspect was getting even more severe during the Covid-19 pandemic when many activities got cancelled and people were confined to their own homes, feeling isolated (B1).

Here, again, the **social, group-related factors** such as the presence of a personal support network or active civil society organizations in a locality become particularly important. Both a personal support network including family and friends with a similar (language) background as well as social support provided by local organizations (library, welfare organization) are seen as crucial to meet people, find friends and improve one's language. As previously mentioned, while the overall atmosphere in the small town is rather ambiguous, most respondents feel supported by the organizations working with them, by local volunteers and by their friends/family.

Brief summary of main insights

Similar to what we found in locality A, respondents in locality B were largely content with the housing given to them, whilst they problematized their situation on the job market. In addition to our findings of locality A, respondents here reported that the administration pushed them into working in low-paying jobs and/or in jobs below their qualification. Also, somewhat different to locality A, the more negative perception of asylum seekers and refugees that initially had led to protests against their accommodation, was also perceived by the newcomers. They experienced the local community as closed off and sensed that there were negative attitudes, leading them to worry about the future of themselves and their children in this place.

3.2.3 Municipality C (Overijssel, small town)

Municipality C lies in the province Overijssel in the East of the Netherlands and has approximately 50.000 to 80.000 residents. Overall, the **local population** has slightly grown and become older over the past 10 years (more than 10% increase in grey pressure) (CBS). The town has a relatively high share of residents with a migration background (Strategic Policy Plan Social Domain 2022): More than 27% of the local population has a 'migration background', of which 16% are categorized as 'non-Western'. The share of foreign residents has increased in the last 10 years by approximately 3% (almost 2% for 'non-Western'). These numbers are somewhat higher than the national average where almost 25% of the population has a migration background (of which 14% are categorized as 'non-Western'). In 2020, approximately 500 adult refugees resided in the municipality (Divosa/Stimulansz, 2020). The local reception center has more than 350 spots for asylum seekers, a number that is sometimes exceeded in exceptional situations, for example in 2015 or in 2021 when the municipality decided to welcome 250 refugees from Afghanistan (newspaper article; N-C-6). Currently, the municipality has one reception center where up to 300 people from Ukraine can stay (temporarily) (November 2022).

From a **socio-economic** perspective, multiple interviewees described municipality C as a "poor" and "deprived" town with a high share of social welfare benefit recipients (N-C-5, N-C-6, N-C-14): In 2021, almost 70 out of 1000 residents received welfare benefits, compared to the national average of 44 out of 1000 (CBS – Participatiewet, 2021). The local coalition agreement states that the town knows "inherited poverty, persistent unemployment, a relatively low-skilled population and a quality of life under pressure" (p. 5). Some respondents link the weak economic position to the town's former textile industry, which heavily relied on migrant labor (N-C-6, N-C-14).

Despite its overall weaker socio-economic position, in the past five years the town's unemployment rate has dropped by more than half (from almost 10% in 2015 to less than 5% in 2020) and the number of job opportunities as well as the number of companies has increased substantially (Kennispunt, 2021). Its economic landscape is now also shaped by big, international tech as well as logistic companies and "more than enough jobs" (N-C-6). Interestingly, when comparing the labor market participation of persons with a Dutch background to persons with a 'non-Western migration background' the gap is smaller in this small town (compared to the other localities): for example, in 2020, almost 65% of persons with a Dutch background were working, compared to 59% of persons with a 'non-Western migration background' (in the other localities the difference between the two groups was between 9 and 10%). When only considering recognized refugees, the percentage is substantially lower – among the persons who arrived in the municipality in 2019, approximately 19% were employed in 2021. In total, almost 50% of all employed refugees work full time, 40% have a part-time job and 10% have multiple jobs (Divosa/Stimulansz, 2021). Overall, the labor market participation in locality C is significantly lower than in the other localities (64% for the total population in 2020, compared to 73% in locality A and 72% in locality B).

The housing market in this small town is characterized by a large share of social housing (especially in older neighborhoods), namely 32%, which is significantly above national average (BZK datawonen, 2020). Like in the other two municipalities, refugees are allocated in social housing provided by the municipality. Due to the uneven distribution of social housing in the city, there is accordingly also an

uneven spatial concentration of refugees/migrants in certain neighborhoods. Similar to the other cases, the perceived separation between groups and the lack of exchange – especially between migrants and Dutch residents – is often related to this spatial concentration of refugees and migrants (N-C-2, N-C-7_2, N-C-12, N-C-13).

The political orientation of the city has changed significantly since 2014 from rather liberal left/Christian democratic to conservative-right. Nowadays, respondents describe the city as "*rechts*" (right) (N-C-2, N-C-3, N-C-14) with the majority of seats in the municipal council being held by three conservative(-right) parties. Despite – or because of – this political climate, there are many volunteers who offer their support to refugees as language coaches in the library or during other activities offered by local NGOs (N-C-1, N-C-3, N-C-4, N-C-7, N-C-8, N-C-15).

RELEVANT INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE LOCALITY

With regards to relevant infrastructure in municipality C, it can be said that the city is well connected and easily accessible by train (experience of the researcher). The locality also appears to have a rather well-established integration-related infrastructure with a centrally located public library, various neighbourhood houses, sports associations/sports facilities, churches, mosques, and a very accessible non-profit organization for refugees. One respondent pointed out that he has to travel to other cities to join his particular church community; but overall, there seem to be various religious communities in the city (also due to the presence of larger Turkish and Armenian communities). Some respondents stated that they had to go to other cities for their job or studies because the city does not have a university itself and the language schools that offer civic integration courses are also rather limited. In terms of public spaces to meet, people mentioned the local library and the neighbourhood houses which are managed by the local welfare organization. There are various shopping possibilities, including Polish and Turkish supermarkets.

ORGANIZATIONAL LANDSCAPE IN THE LOCALITY

In municipality C, the task of social support has been assigned to a **local non-profit service provider** (a local NGO for refugees), which acts as the first contact point for refugees in the city (N-C-15). Similar to municipality A, this local non-profit service provider focuses on supporting refugees during their civic integration program (as opposed to municipality B where the task is carried out by a local welfare organization which is also responsible for other target groups). However, in municipality C the organization is solely responsible for the social support of refugees and *not*, as in municipality A, also for labor market integration, housing, and language courses. The coordinator of the organization explains that "we are for people the 112 – if something happens, they call us immediately, if someone is sick, we are always ready to help. Through our network, we link people to each other." Importantly, the non-profit service provider also offers informal language support for newcomers on a voluntary basis (*not* funded by the municipality).

On the topic of labor market (re-)integration, the municipality collaborates closely with other municipalities and the UWV (Employee Insurance Agency) in the "Employer Service Point". The goal is to help social welfare benefit recipients, including refugees, to find a suitable job (N-C-5). On the topic

of housing, the municipality collaborates with local **housing corporations**. As part of the aforementioned 'performance agreement', municipalities assign refugees to suitable housing and thus help the municipality to fulfil the legal task of 'housing refugees' (Woonvisie 2020 – 2030).

Besides these more formally embedded organizations, there are a few other actors that provide different services to migrants and refugees (next to other target groups).

An important actor is the **local welfare organization**. It is not only responsible for welfare-related tasks in the city, but it also coordinates voluntary work and the '*taalpunt'* (language point) in the local library. Similar to municipality B, the '*taalpunt'* plays an important role in the provision of informal language support: it offers a language café and one on one language lessons with local volunteers. Importantly, the welfare organization offers its services to all residents, not only refugees. Furthermore, there is a **small organization** that facilitates interactions between asylum seekers, refugees, and Dutch residents, through the organization of social activities (N-A-3).

Finally, there are also some migrant associations in the city, for example, a Turkish association founded by former labor migrants from Turkey more than 40 years ago, but they did not seem very involved in the current 'integration process' of newly arrived refugees (they were not mentioned in any interviews and could not be reached by the researcher for an interview).

PRO/ANTI MIGRANT MOBILIZATION

Similar to municipality B, locality C is characterized by a rather ambiguous attitude towards refugees and migrants. On the one hand, there is a lot of engagement by volunteers (N-C-4; N-C-7); on the other hand, there are a lot of supporters of conservative-right parties that usually represent a more restrictive stance towards immigrant integration. According to the survey data, the local attitude towards migrants is between "rather negative" (1), "neutral" (2) and "rather positive" (3) (6 respondents). Respondents point out that it is "not always easy to connect with the 'outside world'" (N-C-8) and it takes time to establish and extent the personal network (N-C-7_2). According to the respondent of a local service provider this is also related to residents' attitude of "*ons kent ons*" (us knows us). The local official states that people regularly complain to the housing corporations that "they do not want refugees as their future neighbors". Overall, respondents did not refer to any actual protests (on the street), but rather referred to the election outcome to describe residents' resentment or "negative gut feeling" (N-C-15) towards newcomers. According to one volunteer of the non-public service provider for integration (social support), the voting results "are not a good sign" (N-C-15) when it comes to immigrant integration. Consequently, municipality C appears to be confronted with resentment expressed politically with people voting for conservative-right parties. These voting results may, in turn, have had a mobilizing effect in the opposite direction, that is, residents disagreeing with the results started volunteering "to show a different side of the city" (N-C-7_2).

One reason for this ambiguous attitude could be the composition of the local population: As previously mentioned, more than ¼ of the city's population has a migration background. By far the largest group comes from Turkey, followed by Moluccan (former Dutch East-Indies), Iraq, Germany and (since 2021) Poland (CBS). Furthermore, multiple interviewees mention the 'tight-knit' Armenian community.

According to many respondents, the presence of the rather large Turkish, Armenian, and Polish (or "Eastern European") communities has had an impact on the socio-cultural dynamics in the city as well as the municipality's approach to integration. The member of the local government appears particularly concerned about the presumed 'inability' of some people (or groups) to integrate. In this context, he refers to the overrepresentation of migrants in criminal statistics (especially 'welfare fraud'), the lack of language skills, and the relatively high percentage of unemployed post-2014 migrants. With regards to the overall population, he further worries about missing social support.

DESCRIPTION OF CONDUCTED FIELDWORK IN LOCALITY C

Participant observation in locality C included various site visits at the local library, the market square in the city center, a neighborhood house, and the office of the local NGO for refugees. The researcher also had various informal conversations with volunteers and was kindly invited to a dinner organized by the NGO for refugees to say goodbye to one of their members. The researcher decided to spend time at the market square because it appeared to be one of the main sites for encounter with the public library, the NGO for refugees as well as the town hall in close proximity. The square is characterized by the presence of various restaurants/cafés as well as different shopping possibilities (bakery, supermarkets, clothing stores) and it was – at various times of the day – very lively. On specific days in the week, there is also a small market on the square where people sell fruits, vegetables, cheese, and other products; the market was visited by people from (presumably) various backgrounds. The square is in walking distance from the train station (10 minutes) and therefore easily reachable. The researchers visited one of the neighborhood houses which is used for various activities; at the time of the visit, a group of elderly women was playing board games and the coordinator of the neighborhood house told the researcher that the house was regularly visited by older (Dutch) residents. Moreover, the researcher spent time at the local NGO for refugees, both for the interviews she conducted and for the focus group discussion. This allowed her to get an impression of the daily 'routines' at the office which got at times very busy with newcomers and volunteers coming and going, interacting with each other, asking for and offering help. The office of the NGO appeared to be a welcoming space where people liked to come by and felt comfortable spending time.

In total, **eight interviews with 13 respondents** were conducted in locality C. The sample of research participants comprises five women and eight men; all respondents have a refugee status. Some respondents have arrived relatively recently in municipality C, others have lived in the town for up to fourteen years. The table provides an overview of the respondents and their personal characteristics.

No	Country of origin	Age	Gender	Legal status	Family status	Level of education	Employment in locality	Residence in country/in locality
1	Syria	> 60	Male	Refugee	Married, three children	University	No employment	8 years/ 6 years
2*	Syria	25-35	Male	Refugee	Married, two children	University	Voluntary work	5 years/ 3 years
	Syria	25-35	Female			Self-employed	At home with children	

3	Syria	25-35	Female	Refugee	Married, four children	Primary school	No employment	6 years
4*	Syria	> 60	Male	Refugee	Married, eight children	Primary school, olive oil producer	No employment	9 years/ 5 years
	Syria	> 60	Female					
5	Turkey	35-45	Male	Refugee	Married, two children	University	Follows education	4 years
6**	Guinea	45-55	Female	Refugee	-	-	Full employment (low paid)	14 years
	Guinea	20-25	Female		Single	High school?	Full employment (low paid)	5 years
	Eritrea	25-35	Male		Single	-	Full employment	7 years
	Syria	25-35	Male		Single	University	Full employment (qualified)	7 years
7	Syria	20-25	Male	Refugee	Single	Primary school	Language school	2 years
8	Egypt	35-45	Male	Refugee	-	University	Language school	2 years

* Respondents were interviewed together as married couple.

** Respondents were interviewed together due to time constraints.

Table 6: Respondent overview Locality C

The respondents were selected because of their recent arrival in municipality C as 'refugee'. Eleven respondents were referred to the researcher via a volunteer who has worked for the local NGO for refugees for more than 20 years. When approaching potential respondents, the volunteer purposely selected persons with various backgrounds in terms of age, gender, educational background, and duration of stay. The sample thus has more variety in terms of age and educational background than, for instance, the sample in locality B (where most respondents have a university degree and a similar age range). Two respondents were approached by the coordinator of the local NGO. Consequently, the sample in locality C comprises persons who have a link to the local NGO and who have received help by both the volunteer and the coordinator. Some respondents also mentioned that they agreed to participate in the interview because they trusted the volunteer and the coordinator and were willing to help them. In one case, it seemed as if the respondent had agreed to be interviewed as a favor to the coordinator without knowing exactly what the purpose and the content of the interview was. This led to some confusion during the interview because the respondent seemingly expected the researcher to find a solution for his immediate problem with the language school; he thus appeared rather frustrated and angry at the end of the conversation. This situation was further complicated by

the fact that the researcher could only communicate with the respondents with the help of an interpreter and – as mentioned above – these emotions got to some extent 'lost in translation'.

All interviews were conducted in the office of the local NGO for refugees over a time span of two days which resulted in a rather tight schedule. The researcher conducted six interviews in one day and two interviews the day after. The interviews were primarily arranged by the volunteer who does not live in the locality anymore but wanted to make sure to be there when the people she approached were interviewed; this explains why the interviews were scheduled in such a time-constraining way. While this meant that each interview 'had to be done' within one hour, it also ensured that the participants could be welcomed by the volunteer whom they knew and trusted. Five interviews were conducted with the help of a volunteer who speaks Arabic and has a refugee background herself and the coordinator of the organization.

The **focus group discussion** in locality took place in the office space of the NGO for refugees and lasted two hours; after the participants of the focus group had left, two more people came in and the conversation continued for another hour. Food as well as hot and cold beverages were provided. The first discussion was attended by six participants. Some respondents were found via the local NGO, others via personal contacts of volunteers and one via a contact at the local welfare organization (during the visit at the neighborhood house). One respondent can be described as long-term resident without migration background; the other five participants arrived in the past years from various countries, including Iran, Tunisia, Yemen, Syria, and Albania. The group of participants consisted of two women and four men; the second 'group' comprised two men from Syria. The participants' age ranged from mid-twenty to above 60. The discussion was moderated by two researchers in Dutch.

Overall, the atmosphere in the focus group discussion can be described as positive. People seemed very engaged and were willing to share their own experiences and perspectives on different topics. Compared to the focus group discussion in locality B, the group appeared less 'cohesive' and people sometimes started short parallel conversations with their neighbors which did not concern the whole group. Participants evaluated their living situation in the locality at times quite differently (for example, one respondent was more vocal about issues such as racism and discrimination, while another participant stated that there was no racism in the locality). Interestingly, some participants seemed to share the understanding that residents with a Turkish background were not very well integrated – they live in their separate communities and do not speak Dutch – which posed the question what the municipality could do to prevent this from happening in the future because it was also perceived as having a negative 'effect' on the newcomers. After the focus group discussion, the two women agreed to meet again in the language group that the Dutch woman coordinated.

After describing the fieldwork conducted in municipality C, we now turn to the analysis and discussion of the data collected, highlighting the main factors influencing local social interactions, attitudes and lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS, INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDES, AND MIGRANTS' EXPERIENCES

This section looks at the various dimensions that influence and shape lived experiences of in- and exclusion and social interaction between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents as well as reciprocal attitudes. The analysis and discussion are primarily based on eight in-depth interviews that were conducted in municipality C, complemented by some more general observations during the various field visits as well as (if needed) interviews conducted for WP3 and WP4.

Spatial dimension

First, the **spatial dimension**: some respondents (both in interviews and the focus group) appear satisfied with living in the municipality because it is a "good and calm town" (C6_1) which "has everything [...] many companies, sports clubs, cafés and a beautiful city center" (C8). Some people consciously chose to move to the town because they had family in the locality (C2) or because they were initially assigned to a smaller municipality nearby where they struggled with the poor public transport infrastructure and lack of (Arabic) supermarkets (C1, C4, C6_4). One respondent explains:

> "I got housing in a small village, with the car it is almost 35 minutes, they have approximately 10 houses there, I had to stay there. There is no supermarket, there is nothing there, almost for one year I stayed like that. I went almost crazy there, why would I lose a year like that, doing nothing? It was a very negative experience. Why put the new people in a small village where they cannot do anything? I came here when I was 26 or 27 years old, maybe if I was in another city or in [locality C] from the beginning, it would have been better for me." (C6_4)

For others, the municipality is too small and there are not many jobs, language courses or organizations who help migrants finding a suitable educational program (C2, C5); some respondents would consider moving to a bigger city in the future to find a job (C7, C5) and/or to provide their children with more opportunities: "Because our children have to go to school and university, to find a good opportunity to work and study, they have to go to a big city, but in this situation, this city is good for family life, but for the future we have to go to another city." (C2). Another respondent from Turkey notes similarly that he would leave the town for a better, job, even though "it is calm, there is nature around and the *real Nederlanders* live here." (C5)

With regards to the local population, respondents mention other migrant communities from Turkey and Morocco; they are sometimes named as a 'negative' example for integration (see also comment on the focus group above). Besides the presence of previous cohorts of migrants, respondents did not refer to other demographic particularities such as gender imbalance or age differences.

Governance dimension

Besides the spatial dimension, **governance-related factors** also play a role in shaping local lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion. While respondents in the other municipalities were very outspoken regarding their experiences in the asylum seeker centers, this topic was only marginally mentioned in municipality C. An older man from Syria pointed out that it was difficult for him to wait for the family reunification, but otherwise he was most of all relieved after arriving in the Netherlands:

> "When we arrived in the Netherlands, we were relieved, we knew that we arrived in a safe country where there is no danger, war, death, or fear. I stayed in the camp four months, and I was not annoyed by anything and there wasn't anything missing, there were food and drinks, everything was alright. After that I got a status and a house, so I have not experienced any difficulties, thank God. […] I received the residence permit within three months, then I applied for family reunion with my wife, it took about six or seven months. It tortured me when I looked at myself here and my wife is there and the family reunion was not going well, it tortured me a bit. But when it was accepted, I was happy, and I forgot about it." (C3_1)

As shown above, some respondents struggled with being assigned to very small municipalities (also regulated by a national policy), but were then able to move to locality C.

Contrary to this aspect (concerning national policies), respondents in both interviews and the focus group had a lot to say about the local government's approach to labor market integration. Respondents' employment situation – and especially the *form* of employment – thus appears to be one of the most important factors influencing their lives and their attitude towards the municipality. Multiple interviewees point out that the municipality cooperates with temporary employment agencies (*uitzendbureaus*) to channel people into the low paid economic sector. Here, they often face precarious working conditions, marked by a lack of predictability, security, and continuity. A young respondent from Guinea describes the system as such:

> "My mum worked in a hospital to clean, then they said come to [name of big company] to work. She went there and began to work, but you never know how many months. After two months they said that they don't have any work for her anymore. […] They don't say that you will work for a certain period and after that you have to search for work, no, they tell people that today is their last day at work. What are you going to do? You don't know when you will stop, you know when you begin but you don't know when you will stop, you cannot search for work that quickly, if you have children and a housing to pay for, it is not possible." (C6_2)

Another respondent, a young man from Syria, emphasizes in the same conversation the problematic role of the municipal work coach here, who seems to reinforce this exploitation on the labor market with threats of losing one's welfare benefits:

> "The work coach [from the municipality] did not help me at all with finding work. The work coach always looks where the bad company is, but not for something good, they say 'go to work', but they don't look if it is good or not […] They only look at your citizen number, not at who you are or at your CV. I see my friend, he also comes from Syria, he is now at work, they told him 'if you do not go to work, we will stop your *uitkering'*. He has two children, so why is that? He would like to work but maybe in another place for another company. For example, I cannot work for [big logistic company] because, I can work somewhere better […] They say here, these are people who can do nothing, so give them work for five days per week to begin in [names of two big companies], work for five or six months and if the company is done with the hustle and bustle, they say that all people have to stop." (C6_4)

These observations are also underlined by the coordinator of the local NGO for refugees who deals with this issue daily. During a conversation, he notes that people are primarily seen as refugees who need to follow a pre-determined trajectory, instead of taking their personal background into account. They are often not given the chance to pursue their personal aspirations and career goals that correspond with their previous experiences but are pushed to work in the low paid sector which, in turn, leads to the loss of skills, experiences and confidence. According to him, the system in place is not facilitating but rather preventing sustainable integration because refugees are in many cases offered short-term, six months contracts by temporary employment agencies and "are used as cheap labor". Even 'language internships' (during which a person still receives social benefits) are used by employers to get a free 'labor force' and avoid offering actual permanent work contracts to refugees.

Related to people being 'trapped' in language internships, is the previously described 'voluntary work trap'. In municipality C, voluntary work is mandatory for people receiving welfare benefits; a potential reduction of these benefits is used as leverage to either get people to work or 'at least' start volunteering somewhere. Similar to experiences described in municipality A, a few respondents in locality C point out that certain institutions gladly accepted their work as volunteers but were not willing to pay them for the same position. One respondent from Guinea highlights that she worked in an elderly house for five years as a volunteer, "doing everything like cleaning and ironing, everything" (C6_1). She asked them if she could work there as cleaning staff but "they said no, only as a volunteer. […] Really, there are many things that are not good, for five years, I worked there as a volunteer because I find it nice to work with old people and to speak with them and walking, I like it. But they don't want that I work normally, only as a volunteer."

Another point that is often mentioned with regards to finding employment is the importance of having a good command of the Dutch language as well as a diploma. At the same time, it appears very difficult to have a previously obtained diploma as well as work experience recognized. A young man from Syria (C2) states that he tried finding qualified work but was often told that his language skills and previously gained experience are not sufficient. He seems puzzled and angered that his potential is not seen and that he either needs to work now "at a low level" without the prospect to "go further" or he has to take a long time to learn the language, get another diploma and then start working:

> "We come with our own experience and can work directly, but here it needs a long time to learn the language […] but I don't like it, if someone comes with experience and work history, they should be able to work directly. In Germany and Belgium, you can go further, also with the recognition of qualifications, but here you need to wait to learn the language and then go further with education on a low level, not the same level. […] I can work now, I studied in the university in Syria, but if I go to work then it is in a company at a low level, nothing to do, just like a robot filling a box or something else, and it stays like that, you have no dream or good future to go further."

Some respondents also mention discrimination as a barrier to finding employment or building a good relationship with colleagues (C1).

Besides employment, governance related factors also include existing (local) policies in place and services offered to migrants. Here respondents very positively emphasize the important role of the local NGO for refugees. The NGO, and in particular the coordinator and the volunteers, helped people "with the required documents, housing, registering in school and opening a bank account" (C1), with finding "new opportunities" (C2) or "with an explanation about a letter" (C8). The NGO is described as very accessible and reliable – especially compared to the municipality where the contact person changes constantly (C5, C7). The NGO receives funding from the municipality to provide refugees social support, but it also offers additional informal language support.

While the support provided by the NGO is seen as crucial, the other services are evaluated less positively. Two younger respondents talk about their problems in the language school. A young man from Syria (C7) is very unhappy with the number of hours offered by the language school. According to him, three hours a day for three days a week is not sufficient because it does not allow him to make a lot of progress (also mentioned in the focus group). And the young woman from Guinea is critical about sending younger refugees into 'standard' language courses with "only grandfathers and grandmothers, I was the only girl there and everyone else was old. […] People spoke with those who speak the same language and I sat alone, only old people there and I didn't understand anything." (C6_2) She would have therefore much rather preferred being in a school with younger Dutch people. She eventually stopped her course and started working.

During the focus group discussion, some participants mentioned with regards to the local support structure that cultural activities and events (for example, visits to a museum) should be made more accessible. Currently, it is too expensive to visit a museum, especially for families with more children. A focus group participant from Tunisia adds here: "Maybe the municipality thinks that foreigners are only here to work and sleep, but we are also here to live and enjoy and grow and build a good future". More generally, there seems to be a need for more places to meet and/or more transparency with regards to existing places and activities. Some participants were, for instance, not aware that the neighborhood houses offer activities or that the NGO has a language group for women.

Discursive and political dimension

Moving away from local policies, few respondents in locality C also refer to **dominant media discourses** and discursively constructed images about 'the refugee' or 'the Muslim migrant'. During the interview, a respondent from Turkey points out that the media creates a false image of Muslims by only showing bad things about Syria, Afghanistan, or Saudi Arabia. He understands that (Dutch) people may be afraid of Muslims due to these TV reports; he wants to show that not all Muslims are like that by seeking contact with other (Dutch) residents. Here, he also refers to members of the local Turkish community who arrived more than 50 years ago and only "watch Turkish TV, go to Turkish cafés, stay within their own community and are less in contact with other Dutch people" (C5) and stresses that *he* does not want to do that. Instead, for him it is important to learn the language and exchange with other cultures. The respondent's narrative shows that both general media discourses as well as locality-specific conditions can be closely interrelated and may impact people's lives in different ways; here, it seems as if his awareness of the 'bad image' of Muslims created by the media influences to some extent also his decision to distance himself from the local Turkish community who – by only staying among

themselves – do not actively show that 'Muslims can be different'. Throughout the interview, the respondent describes himself as a very positive person and underlines the importance of empathy, dialogue and contact to learn from each other and foster understanding among people.

During the focus group discussion, a young man from Iran underlines that it is important to shape a more positive narrative and to explain better *why* most people are here, namely "because they did not have any other option". According to him, it would be good if people understood that "letting people study and then find a good job is not only good for them, but also for the Netherlands". Other participants mention that "80% of Dutch people do not want to be in contact with foreigners" or that they always "have to take the first step. Maybe because they |their neighbors] have had bad experiences with other foreigners, this is why they wait to see if I am good, they keep their distance." It becomes yet again clear that local interactions are marked by a 'us' vs. 'them' dynamic and may be influenced by previous experiences, 'false' assumptions, or negative narratives about foreigners.

Again, respondents did not explicitly refer to the political orientation of the municipality but based on findings from the other WPs it can be said that the rather right-conservative orientation of the local government influences the support structure and determines the 'first-work' approach (see WP4 for more details). As described above, this approach is also felt by the newcomers themselves by being 'pushed' towards working instead of learning the language or following another education instead.

While respondents report similar experiences/difficulties in the interviews (for example, with regards to finding qualified/paid employment or being confronted with one-sided images of (Muslim) refugees), their experiences also differ depending on **individual factors** that shape interaction and experiences of in- and exclusion.

Age is perceived as an important factor: three respondents state that for them it was more difficult to learn the language because they are already older; in comparison, it was much easier for their children because they are younger (C1, C3) and less "busy in their head" (C4):

> "The language is difficult, not only the Dutch one, but language in general is difficult for the older people, the youngsters learn fast, that's because the older people are busy in their head. You know there are problems, now I'm thinking about my country, it is not in my own hands. I had lands, olives, wine grapes, cherry trees and a house and it has been all taken away. But if one's mind is clear then I would learn a bit, but that's the issue, we are also old. Our grandparents said that the old bull cannot learn farming, but the young ones yes." (C4)

Besides learning the language, it also appears more difficult to get used to the new environment and change one's habits, as an older man from Syria puts it:

> "For us, the older people, we cannot get used to the Dutch habits. For example, we live in a house with a backyard, the children of the neighbors play football in their backyard, and they kick the ball in our backyard […] and it breaks something in our backyard. In Holland it is permitted but, I think that it should not necessarily be permitted."

With regards to how they were welcomed in the city, he further explains: "There was no welcoming. In our country we are used to welcome the guest or the neighbor to make contact and visits, but here that is not the case. They say hello but nothing more." According to him, people have also become less friendly over the years.

Here, a person's (old) age and ethnic background intersect – according to the respondent, his older age makes it more difficult for him to change his habits; holding onto his habits, in turn, may sometimes lead to some irritation or disappointment regarding people's behavior in the Netherlands. This is further exacerbated by difficulties to learn the language.

More generally, **language** – the importance of speaking Dutch, while facing difficulties to learn it – was a common and prominent thread throughout most interviews and during the focus group discussion (C1, C3, C4, C5, C7). Speaking the language is deemed as crucial to find work and communicate with others. Not being able to communicate may also lead to feelings of alienation and shame:

> "When I speak with a woman or when I mix up the words, I feel ashamed and then I never speak again to that person, or if I ask something and it is refused, then I don't speak again to that person […] If I can't ask a question, I become ashamed, and I stay silent. If someone speaks Dutch to me and I cannot respond I become very ashamed." (C7)

In municipality C, respondents also highlight that their **family situation** impacts their experiences; and because this argument is only mentioned by women, **gender** can be seen as a related factor here. Three women – two from Syria and one from Albania – explain that it is difficult to find a job that allows them to also look after their children (C2, C3, focus group participant): "I find jobs, but they need someone to work five days per week. But I cannot work five days per week as I have children, housework, and appointments for the children at the dentist and in school." (C3)

Other individual factors include a person's **educational background** – similar to respondents in other localities, persons with a university degree stress the importance of not finding just any job (in the low-paid sector) but to be given the chance to 'go further' (C2); their aspirations seem to differ from the aspirations of people with a 'lower' educational background (who seem less determined to obtain another diploma or make a career). Here, age may also play a role as older respondents may not have the time to study again or learn another profession (C1).

Lastly, we turn to **social, group-related factors** such as the presence of a personal support network or active civil society or religious organizations in the locality. One respondent (C2) underlines the importance of having family in the same town because they can help with the language as well as with "the rules here in the city and the country". Moreover, the social support and activities offered by local organizations (NGO, library, welfare organization) and by (Dutch) volunteers are seen as crucial to settle down, get the right information and meet other people. Yet, on a more general basis, most respondents appear to have only limited contact to Dutch residents which is often explained with missing language skills; the contact with neighbors is described as 'friendly', but often limited to a greeting. Some respondents occasionally also have a coffee with their neighbors.

Brief summary of main insights

In locality C, which was characterized as a rather poor and post-industrial locality with a high share of previous immigrants from Turkish and other descent, the 'established' immigrant groups were a strong reference point in the narratives of our respondents. Given that they were often allocated housing in neighborhoods already characterized by high shares of established migrants, they experienced limited opportunities of interaction with Dutch residents. The situation on the job market, similar to other localities, was problematized by many of our respondents. But specific to this locality, respondents pointed to the controversial role of temporary employment agencies as well as the role of the municipal work coaches in reinforcing exploitative mechanisms by these agencies and employers' volunteering/internship schemes. An important distinction was also made between the services of the municipality and the services of the local NGO, with the former being perceived as of little help and the latter as being very helpful. Another problem pointed to in this locality was the lack of accessibility of cultural events and activities in the city for refugees.

3.2.4 Municipality D (rural area, Drenthe)

Municipality D lies in the province Drenthe in the North of the Netherlands and has approximately 20.000 to 40.000 residents. Respondents describe the locality as a small "*plattelandsgemeente*" (rural municipality), comprising one central town and almost 30 surrounding smaller villages.

Less than 9% of the **local population** has a 'migration background', of which less than 4% are categorized as 'non-Western'. The share of foreign residents has increased in the last 10 years by approximately 1% (almost 2% for 'non-Western'). These numbers are significantly lower than the national average where almost 25% of the population has a migration background (of which 14% are categorized as 'non-Western'). Despite the lower share of persons with a 'migration background' among the local population, four out of five respondents indicated in the survey that the municipality has had experience with the arrival and settlement of migrants also before 2014. This may be related to the fact that already in 1995, an asylum seeker center was established in one of the villages (with more than 300 spots). While the municipality is pleased with the reception center, it is not willing to establish a second one, before the other municipalities in the region 'have taken their responsibility' (Coalition Agreement 2018, p. 11). Currently, the municipality has three reception centers (emergency shelters) for Ukrainians where approximately 175 people can stay (temporarily) (November 2022).

The municipality has for a long time been subjected to a "shrinkage scenario" (N-D-10), that is, the local population has declined over the past 10 years. This trend has only recently been slightly reversed. The population of municipality D has aged significantly, with an increase of grey pressure by almost 20% since 2010 (CBS; Policy Plan Social Domain 2017, p. 14).

When looking at the **economic situation** in the municipality, various respondents point out that the rural area is located in an overall poor(er) region and refer as an explanation to the region's former peat colonies that have shaped the area until today (N-D-10, N-D-14, N-D-15). Traditionally, 'peat villages' (villages located in the peat colonies) are economically not very strong, characterized by a higher unemployment rate, generational poverty, and a population with a lower educational

background.[23] Importantly, there are inner municipal differences in terms of socio-economic status – not all villages are affected by the developments mentioned above in the same way: "A number of areas in our municipality have a low economic status. These are mainly the areas in [the main city and two villages]. In the rest of the municipality, the socio-economic status is about the same as the average in the Netherlands." (Policy Plan Social Domain 2017, p. 14) Overall, the municipality has less jobs than the national average and more people with lower educational background (ibid., p. 15). However, the unemployment level is on average lower and there are less social welfare benefit recipients (CBS – Participatiewet, 2021). This is also mentioned by the union representative who describes that the municipality is economically better off than the other municipalities in the region and is therefore facing less problems. The most important economic sectors comprise tourism, agriculture, industry, and SME (small and medium size enterprises) (Coalition Agreement 2018, p. 10).

When comparing the labor market participation of persons with a Dutch background to persons with a 'non-Western migration background' the gap is significantly bigger, compared to the other localities: in 2020, almost 66% of persons with a Dutch background were working, compared to only 49% of persons with a 'non-Western migration background' (in the other localities the difference between the two groups was between 9 and 10%). In 2018, 75 refugees started a work- or language-placement, an educational program or dual training, 19 refugees started working (part-time). In 2019, 38 refugees found a (part-time) job and five started an educational program (financial reports 2018 and 2019). Overall, the labor market participation in locality D is significantly lower than in localities A and B (65% for the total population in 2020, compared to almost 73% in locality A and almost 72% in locality B).

The share of social **housing** in relation to the total housing stock lies at 21% and is hence significantly lower than the national average and the share in the other localities (BZK datawonen, 2020). Most of the social rental apartments are located in the post-war neighborhoods in the main town and sporadically in some of the smaller villages, leading to a rather segregated housing situation within the municipality: there are currently approximately 180 refugees living in the municipalities who are mainly concentrated in the main town and in four to five villages (out of almost 30) due to the uneven distribution of social housing within the municipality (N-D-9).

The locality's **political orientation** can be described as both conservative and social-democratic. The strongest party in the municipal council is an independent, local party that pays particular attention to the needs of the surrounding villages and neighborhoods (N-D-5). The member of the local government responsible for integration has a social-democratic background. His approach to integration is described by various respondents as 'very social and involved' (N-D-7, N-D-15).

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[23] The Rijksuniversiteit Groningen has conducted research on intergenerational poverty in the peat colonies. More information and first results can be found here: https://uithetmoeras.nl.

RELEVANT INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE LOCALITY

When looking at relevant infrastructure in the municipality, it is important to keep its particular composition – one main town and almost 30 smaller surrounding villages – in mind. For instance, while the main town is well connected to other localities in the region (and beyond) by train, the smaller villages are mainly reachable by bus. This is also reflected in the researcher's fieldwork experience where the main town of the municipality was easily accessible, while the smaller villages were harder to reach with busses only running a few times per hour. Respondents also pointed out that even though the main town has a train station, taking public transport is very expensive.

The difference between the main town and the surrounding villages becomes further apparent with regards to the integration-related infrastructure. A multifunctional neighborhood center is located in the main town and is perceived by most respondents as important meeting point. Refugees living in the villages therefore have to travel to the town to, for example, go to the local language school or to receive support by the Dutch Council for Refugees. The public library's language activity (*taalpunt*) is also offered in one of the villages, but most activities are organized in the central town. With regards to educational institutions, respondents mentioned that while there are sufficient primary schools, their children usually had to go to other towns/cities to attend high school because there are only two high schools in the municipality itself. Some respondents also traveled to other towns/cities to attend language courses because of the limited offer in the municipality (only one language school with small classes). In terms of shopping, the main town has (again) more variety to offer, compared to the small villages where there is sometimes only one supermarket. Importantly, the main town has a Syrian supermarket – which was highlighted positively – and the multifunctional neighborhood center hosts a small prayer room for Muslims. However, not all respondents seemed aware of that and stated that they often go to a mosque in a bigger town nearby. The main town has a big park which is centrally located and in walking distance from the train station, the market square as well as the multifunctional neighborhood center.

ORGANIZATIONAL LANDSCAPE IN THE LOCALITY

Contrary to the other localities, municipality D has assigned the task of 'social support' not to a local actor, but to the **Dutch Council for Refugees**, a national non-governmental actor that offers social support in most Dutch municipalities. In locality D, the Dutch Council for Refugees receives funding from the municipality to support refugees over a period of 18 months. This period is considerably shorter than in the other municipalities where refugees are supported for up to 36 months. The Dutch Council for Refugees works primarily with volunteers who become the main contact point for persons following the civic integration program. The national NGO perceives itself as the "voice of refugees, offering a helping hand and lending an open ear to their needs" (N-D-2).

After 18 months, the task of assisting refugees if they face problems is transferred to the local **welfare organization**. Importantly, the welfare organization offers its services to all residents (N-D-4). Additionally, the organization has initiated target-group specific projects, for example in collaboration with the local asylum seeker center to activate refugees who have already been given a residence permit, but still live in the reception center (N-D-8).

Less formally involved, but nonetheless an important actor is a **national NGO** that offers once a week individual as well as group language lessons for migrants and refugees – regardless of their status. Their work (coordination of the informal language support as well as the language education itself) is based on the commitment of volunteers. Moreover, the NGO provides other services such as support with administrative tasks to a wider group of people to increase people's self-sufficiency.

Additional informal language support is offered by the *taalpunt* in the local **library**. However, the services offered by the *taalpunt* are only accessible to those who have already completed their civic integration or for those who are exempt from following the civic integration trajectory. This is for instance different in municipalities B and C where the local *taalpunt* is accessible to a broader group.

The locality has a local **language school** where refugees – and other migrants – can follow Dutch language courses. But its role goes beyond the mere provision of formal education. The coordinator describes her role as being an 'anchor' for persons in need of help. Due to the small size of the municipality, this was highlighted as one important element of the existing integration support structure. However, the local language school did not win the tender necessary to continue offering civic integration classes under the new Civic Integration Act and may therefore close its doors soon.

With regards to the topic of labor market integration, the **municipality** decided to organize this task 'in-house' through the role of *klantmanagers* who specifically focus on facilitating refugees' access to the labor market (N-D-9). More generally, the municipality has chosen to leave tasks related to the social domain within the municipal administration instead of transferring the responsibility to a separate organization.

Importantly, all these public and non-public organizations (and more) are represented in a **multifunctional neighborhood center**, making services easily accessible. The multifunctional neighborhood center appears to be a crucial part of the organizational landscape in the municipality.

The **housing corporation** is responsible for assigning refugees to appropriate housing; but it appears that its activities go beyond this task, for example, they also make sure that refugees understand *how* to live in the local community by helping them pick and hang the 'right' curtains and they facilitate interaction between new and old tenants (N-D-1).

PRO/ANTI MIGRANT MOBILIZATION

With regards to the situation of integration in the municipality, it becomes apparent that – similar to the other municipalities – the picture is not as clear cut. On the one hand, respondents highlight several aspects that are going well, for example, the municipality is accommodating *more* refugees than legally required (N-D-10). Moreover, the collaboration between public, non-public and private actors and the commitment of the municipality are described as positive (N-D-1, N-D-2, N-D-14). The asylum seeker center is widely accepted among the local population and even seen as "part of our village" (N-D-8).

On the other hand, respondents also describe forms of resistance in some neighborhoods, the influence of prejudices and stereotypes and a general lack of familiarity with people from other

countries (N-D-1, N-D-2, N-D-8, N-D-13). According to the survey data, the local attitude towards migrants is between "rather negative" (2), "neutral" (3) and "rather positive" (1) (6 respondents).

An important characteristic of this locality (and the region more generally) is the concept of '*naoberschap*' (literally translated to 'neighborliness') which means that neighbors care for and look after each other (N-D-11). It appears that this does not necessarily always apply to newcomers – especially to those 'deviating' from well-established social rules and norms that are defining elements of the small community. Respondents underline that residents are not per se against refugees or newcomers (N-D-11), but 'the unknown' may cause fear and suspicion. In this context, almost all respondents mention "curtains" – or better the 'right' type of curtains – as a major point of controversy (N-D-1, N-D-5, N-D-9, N-D-11, N-D-12, N-D-14). Residents have complained about newcomers keeping their curtains closed during the day and/or hanging the 'wrong' curtains in their apartments.

Moreover, public narratives fueling the idea that "refugees get everything" (N-D-4) and compete for the same type of jobs and housing have resulted in tensions between new and old residents (N-D-5, N-D-15). While the implicit, uneasy 'gut feeling' of residents towards refugees is usually expressed "over a beer at a birthday" (N-D-5) or towards employees of the housing corporation and members of government, there have also been actual clashes between migrants and long-term residents (N-D-11). One employee of the local welfare organization mentions an incident where residents of a village tried to prevent a Syrian family from settling down by attacking their house. Protest was also expressed through slogans on the street saying, "our people first" (N-D-8). These actions resulted in a solidarity movement in the village, helping the refugees to feel welcome.

DESCRIPTION OF CONDUCTED FIELDWORK IN LOCALITY D

Participant observation in locality D included various site visits and participation in Dutch language classes. During her multiple stays in the locality, the researcher visited the public library, the local asylum seeker center, the market square and various neighborhoods. She also spent time at the multifunctional neighborhood center – to meet potential respondents in the language course, to conduct interviews and for the focus group discussion – and was invited to the house of three respondents for coffee/tea and dinner. The researcher decided to visit the neighborhood center multiple times because it is considered an important site of encounter for both newcomers and long-term residents. The center was established in a former school building following the initiative of local organizations (this initiative was not primarily led by the municipality). It is located near a big park and in an old neighborhood with 50% social housing, a relatively high percentage of people with a migration background (compared to the municipal average) and newly arrived refugees (N-C-1). As previously mentioned, all important public and non-public actors offer their services under one roof here (not only the language school or the national NGO, but for example also a food and clothing bank); besides these more formal services, there are also various other activities that take place in the center where people meet and interact. Multiple respondents and people working in the center mentioned, for example, a sewing group that regularly comes together. The 'heart' of the center is an open space in the middle of the building with a kitchen and multiple tables; coffee and tea are regularly provided by volunteers working in the center. In conversations with volunteers and employees, the researcher learned that the center is well known and visited by people who use the services, but its visibility could

be further increased to also include groups who 'typically' would not make use of these (social) services or who do not live in the neighborhood. The center also has a big vegetable garden which is well taken care of by a volunteer from Syria; the idea is to grow and eventually sell the vegetables to the residents in the neighborhood to help 'spread the word' about the multifunctional center and attract more people. For this purpose, some of the center's staff and volunteers invited the mayor to show him the garden and to let him harvest the first potatoes of the year. Two researchers happened to be at the center when the mayor came and were invited to join the event which was also reflective of the low-threshold, welcoming approach of the center. The researchers were invited for cake and coffee and had the chance to observe the dynamics between volunteers, paid staff, and a representative of the political establishment. Interestingly, not many other guests were invited to the event, but it remained a rather small and casual gathering.

Being invited to people's houses gave the researcher the chance to see where and how people lived, and to meet people in an environment where they felt most comfortable. One married couple invited the researcher for dinner after learning that she was staying by herself for two more days. She got to enjoy delicious Syrian food, spent the evening with the couple and their five children, learned more about their daily lives and was taught some first Arabic words by the couple's daughters.

In total, **seven interviews with 11 respondents** were conducted in locality D. The sample of research participants comprises seven women and four men; four married couples were interviewed together; all respondents have a refugee status. Some respondents have arrived relatively recently in municipality D (less than one year ago), others have lived in the town for up to six years. The table provides an overview of the respondents and their personal characteristics.

No	Country of origin	Age	Gender	Legal status	Family status	Level of education	Employment in locality	Residence in country/in locality
1	Syria	35-45	Female	Refugee	Married, six children	Primary school	Voluntary work	5 years/ 4 years
2*	Syria	35-45	Male	Refugee	Married, two children	No formal qualification	Internship	3 years/ 2 years
	Syria	25-35	Female				Language school	1 year
3*	Yemen	25-35	Female	Refugee	Married, one child	University	No employment	1 year
	Yemen	35-45	Male			University	Employment (part-time, low paid)	2 years/ 1 year
4*	Syria	35-45	Female	Refugee	Married, five children	Primary school	Language school	2 years/ 1 year
	Syria	35-45	Male			No formal qualification	Voluntary work	

5*	Syria	35-45	Female	Refugee	Married, three children	University	Voluntary work	3 years/
	Syria	35-45	Male			University	Employment (part-time, low paid)	2 years
6	Eritrea	35-45	Female	Refugee	Married, three children	University (unfinished)	Full employment (education)	6 years
7	Eritrea	35-45	Female	Refugee	Divorced, two children	No formal qualification?	No employment	6 years

*Respondents were interviewed together as married couple.

Table 7: Respondent overview Locality D

The respondents were selected because of their recent arrival in municipality D as 'refugee' (after 2014). The researcher was introduced to seven respondents by their Dutch language teacher; she was referred to three respondents via a municipal official and met one respondent through an employee of the local welfare organization. The sample thus comprises again persons who are linked to an organization, in this case primarily the language school. The sample is biased in terms of participants' age (respondents are between 30 and 40/45 years old) and their family status because 10 out of 11 respondents are married and all respondents have children; moreover, the fact that some respondents were interviewed together may have also had an influence on the conversation. Finally, some respondents have arrived very recently in the locality which is why they have not necessarily experienced significant changes over time (this also applies to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees because at the time of the interview, respondents were not aware of any Ukrainians living in the municipality).

Two interviews were conducted in the multifunctional center, three interviews were conducted at people's homes, one interview took place in the public library and for the final interview, the researcher met the respondent at her workplace.

In hindsight, the timing of the **focus group** in locality D proved not ideal, primarily because of the start of school holidays, the fact that on Wednesdays there are no activities in the multifunctional center, and because of the short notice (the researcher was told that next time, this should be planned more in advance). The researcher tried to find participants for the focus group via different means, mainly by contacting interview partners from WP3 and WP4 and asking for their support and by speaking to people and volunteers in the neighborhood center. In the end, two persons attended the focus group discussion. One participant is a person with a refugee background from Syria who has lived in the municipality for six years and works as a volunteer at the multifunctional center; the other participant is a long-term resident (Dutch), living in a bigger town nearby, but working the municipality D. Importantly, both respondents knew each other before the focus group discussion. Despite 'only' having two participants, the focus group discussion lasted two hours and the participants and the two researchers had an interesting discussion, covering challenges at the individual level (mental health and loneliness), the attitude of residents in the locality, and potential solutions to address conflicts within the municipality. The atmosphere during the discussion was mainly positive, but it also became

apparent that the participant with a refugee background has had many negative experiences and was struggling with different mental health related and other problems. He openly shared his perspective and was critical of the attitude of many residents in the locality, also regarding the recognition of his contribution as volunteer in the center. After the focus group discussion, the researchers joined a group of volunteers who organized the mayor's visit (see above) and learned more about the history of the center and the vegetable garden that was taken care of by the Syrian participant.

After describing the fieldwork conducted in municipality D, we now turn to the analysis and discussion of the data collected, highlighting the main factors influencing local social interactions, attitudes and lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS, INDIVIDUAL ATTITUDES, AND MIGRANTS' EXPERIENCES

This section looks at the various dimensions that influence and shape lived experiences of in- and exclusion and social interaction between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents as well as reciprocal attitudes. The analysis and discussion are primarily based on seven in-depth interviews that were conducted in municipality D, complemented by some more general observations during the various field visits as well as (if needed) interviews conducted for WP3 and WP4.

Spatial dimension

First, the **spatial dimension**: almost all respondents appear to be satisfied with living in the rural area in Drenthe, although it took a few of them some time to get used to it (D2, D5). All respondents appreciate the calmness and safety of the area, especially because of their children, they like that people greet and help each other and that it is less anonymous than bigger cities: "[Name of the municipality] is nice, better than a big city, it is calm here, I like it and my children are also happy." (D1) A couple from Syria who lives in one of the small villages adds similarly that "it is good for our children, not many people drink or smoke Hashish. With the neighbors we say 'hello, hello' and we get some help." (D2_1) Another respondent likewise associates 'bad behavior' such as "smoking joints" with big cities and mentions that his neighbors helped him with moving in (D4). With regards to the calmness of the city, a respondent from Syria jokingly points out that in this town "we have *avondklok* [curfew] all the time because very few people walk around here" (D5_2).

However, similar to the other small towns (B and C), respondents also consider moving to a bigger city – especially for the sake of their children – because there is no university in town and job opportunities are limited (D1-3, D5, D6). Moreover, the medical infrastructure is less developed and traveling to other places is expensive:

> "I am happy that we are finally together. But sometimes I tell him that I prefer being in a different place. Like when we go to [names two cities] to do a checkup [respondent was pregnant at the time of the interview], why do we not have a hospital here? It is a small town and transportation is quite expensive in the Netherlands. I tell him, maybe it is better to be in a bigger place with a hospital nearby. And I have a medical background and I am thinking if I want to work, where do I find a job here?" (D3_1)

With regards to the **local population**, respondents note that a lot of old people live in the locality which may also have an impact on the interactions with them. A woman from Yemen describes for example:

> "Most people are old and old aged people are mostly careful, especially with strangers. Sometimes they stare at you and make you feel uncomfortable, but I understand. All old people are like this. But when you see it, you think it is maybe because you are not from here, but we try to remind ourselves, no they are old people, it is normal for them to be suspicious. We do not take it personally." (D3_1)

Based on the stories shared in the interviews, it also appears as if – due to the smaller size of the town and the rather homogeneous make-up of the local population – the social control among residents and neighbors is much tighter. A couple from Syria mentions in the conversation that they were asked by a person working for the municipality why they – or more generally Arabs – hang thick curtains and keep them closed. One of their friends has been asked to change her curtains, "to put normal curtains, without the blackout. And then they gave them other curtains […] They think that we hide something. But we do not hide anything. We keep the curtains closed because I do not wear my headscarf at home." (D5_1) The husband jokingly adds: "When we are going to visit someone, and we do not know the exact number, we know which house it is because we see that the *voortuin* is not so *netjes* and clean and the curtains are closed" – thereby alluding to the local narrative that "only us *buitenlanders* apparently put thick curtains on." (D5_2) The topic of the 'right' or 'wrong' curtains is not only mentioned in the interviews (even more prominently in the WP3 and WP4 interviews), but also during the focus group discussion. Here, the participant from Syria states that foreigners are usually put into one box and that there is a big gap between 'them' and 'us'; this is why he would never apply for Dutch citizenship – although he is already eligible – because "I will never be Dutch anyway, only on paper."

Another respondent's story shows further how social control is exercised in the locality and how this relates to perceived cultural differences: "When you live in a village it is very good when you have small kids, everyone takes care of them. But here, you eat dinner at five or six and when the children are not home, people will notice and say that she doesn't take care of her children. During dinner time, they play outside. This can cause a problem." While she clearly sees the advantages of living in a small village, she still feels "all the time as if we are under control, people always want to know who comes, who goes, they interfere with everything. […] When a new car comes, from Germany for example, when family comes, people ask how long do they stay? Who are they?" (D6) Once her neighbor even called the police because she assumed wrongly that the respondent had left her children at home by themselves; this incident upset her because she was very close to the neighbor and had hoped that she would speak to her first instead of calling the police.

This 'duality' is also expressed in other respondents' narratives where they explain that people in the municipality are mostly nice, friendly, and welcoming, but some residents may also be distant and hold negative or suspicious attitudes towards newcomers (D1, D3, D5).

Governance dimension

In terms of **governance-related factors**, respondents mention various challenges related to the national dispersal mechanism, their employment situation as well as the current support structure in place. First, some respondents describe their experiences in the reception facilities as rather negative and stressful. Many had to move multiple times to different asylum seeker centers, often feeling unsafe and unhappy (D2, D4, D5). Some respondents were moreover initially not happy with their assignment to the small locality because they had hoped to be assigned to a bigger city.

Second, with regards to the labor market, people refer to similar challenges to finding (qualified) employment, namely the importance of speaking Dutch and having a (recognized) diploma – both resources that cannot easily be acquired. A respondent from Syria (D5_2) states, for instance, that it is very hard to stay without work but "if someone does not speak Dutch well and has no diploma, it is difficult to find a job. Different culture, different background, different atmosphere, everything is different." Similar to other refugees in the town, he was able to find a low-paid job where a diploma and Dutch language skills are not required, but under rather precarious working conditions. Having had a very successful career in Saudi Arabia before coming to the Netherlands, made it very challenging for him and his family to adjust to the new life in the small town. A woman from Eritrea (D6) describes similarly that many people find it discomforting (*vervelend*) to have a (university) degree and to then start working in the cleaning sector. At the same time, their language skills do often not allow them to work in a 'skilled' profession or in an office. The latter aspect was also one of the reasons why a respondent from Yemen with an engineering background took a low-paid job first, before looking for a job that is more related to his field. According to him, "being a worker here is not bad" (D3_2) because there is a labor law which protects his rights, and he gets a minimum salary. His idea was to improve his language skills while working although he then quickly realized that there were not many colleagues to speak to. He and his wife underline that there should be more consideration regarding people's qualification and the fact that they can contribute something.

While most respondents stress the importance of finding paid work, a few also highlight that they like their voluntary work because they can improve their language and interact with people (D5_1); otherwise, they "would only sit at home and forget the language" (D1).

Third, besides employment, the current **support structure and related services** have been critically mentioned by multiple persons. Contrary to the other municipalities, the national NGO offering social support to refugees does not have permanent staff in the locality itself; instead, people can visit the consultation hour once a week which is run by different volunteers. Respondents were critical about the low number of consultation hours because "one day is not enough" (D3_1) and the fact that support was primarily provided by volunteers who often do not speak their language which led to misunderstandings in the past. One respondent (D6) summarizes the dilemma at hand:

> "The Dutch Council for Refugees primarily works with volunteers and these volunteers do not handle things seriously. They are not available on a regular basis, they are free once a week, then available the other week. But when you are new here, you need all the information as soon as possible. The Dutch Council for Refugees does not address these things immediately,

they work slowly, once a week you can go to their consultation hour, but we need more than that. The first months are very important. Someone with a paid job should handle this seriously. I don't mean to say that volunteers are doing a bad job, but you must supervise the process."

Moreover, people do usually not have one clear reference person who guides them through the 'integration' process over a longer time period; instead, the consultation hours are every time offered by a different volunteer, requiring the person seeking support to explain their request repeatedly (D3_1). Importantly, respondents do not 'blame' the volunteers per se, but rather the system that relies so heavily on the voluntary engagement of other residents. Offering most services and information in Dutch is considered another challenge.

Because of this reliance on volunteers, the support structure appears rather fragile, and refugees are often not given the support they need, especially in the first months after their arrival. This may have consequences because if "people do not understand how it works, [they] may get into trouble later on. What are your rights? What are your obligations? These things must be explained well." (D6) According to the respondent from Eritrea this applies also to more practical aspects, that is, it should be explained "where to buy a public transport card, how to separate the waste, how to handle money, how to deal with the *belastingdienst*, how to find an insurance" (D6). A respondent from Syria (D5) stresses likewise the importance of providing information and explanation to people, already during the asylum procedure:

> "The most important time you spend is in the asylum seeker center because from there your life will start. If you have good information at that time, you can step forward easier. But if you only listen to some Facebook groups, some WhatsApp information then you will be confused, you do not know what to do, how to use your time, how to benefit from it. [...] There should be someone [governmental organization/official] answering the questions [...] it is better to tell me that the IND [Dutch immigration authority], does not have enough employees, they didn't expect that suddenly a lot of people would come and ask for asylum. Just give me the information, the explanation, then I will feel, yes, this is right and not have more anger."

Both focus group participants call similarly for more transparency and explanation for newcomers, but also for residents who are 'confronted' with the arrival of newcomers. Explaining who the newcomers are, how long they are staying, and what they will be doing could prevent unrest. According to them, the municipality could also actively help newcomers to get in touch with their neighbors (in addition to providing more practical/bureaucratic guidance).

Interestingly, many respondents positively highlight the role of the contact person at the municipality where they received help with their administration, but also with finding (voluntary) work and educational programs. The contact between newcomers and the municipal officials appears to be much closer in locality D (compared to the other cases where the municipality was either not mentioned as important actor in the support network or mentioned in rather negative terms).

Another important actor – offering both help as well as a space of encounter – is the local language school. While most respondents were content with the school and really enjoyed going there, others were more critical about the quality of the courses offered (D5, D6). According to one respondent, the problem is that "classes are mixed with different people on different language levels". While participating in the language courses, the researcher also got the impression that the relatively small classes comprised persons whose language skills differed greatly.

Discursive and political dimension

Moving away from the governance-related dimension, respondents' narratives show that their interactions, attitudes, and experiences are also influenced by **discourses** surrounding topics of migration and integration and more particularly by images of 'the refugee' or 'the Muslim migrant'.

Multiple respondents assume that Dutch people may be afraid of them because they are refugees who fled a war, and this could explain why these people are hesitant to interact with them:

> "We come from the war, maybe people are scared to make contact with people who come from Syria, Turkey or Iraq. Maybe, I do not know, but I think that this is why they do not want more contact. Maybe they hear that people who come from Syria, who come from the war, have problems, maybe their 'head is not good', they saw their family die. They are maybe scared that if they make contact with people, they also start having problems. This is why they say, 'my head is better if I do not make contact'." (D1)

The woman from Syria continues by stating that "maybe when we are nice, go to school and start working, this will get better, people are then less scared." (D1) Conversely, the presumed fear is also a reason why they themselves may "feel shy to speak with them [Dutch people]. I think they feel scared, and I don't like to make people feel scared. […] we do not want them to feel uncomfortable." (D3_1) The woman from Yemen explains further that

> "If something happened to us, we would look for an Arabic family to help us, to ask for a favor, someone like us. Because we do not know what will happen if we knock at another door. How they are and what they think. We are trying to learn more about their culture and how they think. How they think about the stranger because we are strangers to them." (D3_1)

Here, the presumed 'fear' of refugees or strangers clearly impacts how newcomers react to their environment and in particular to Dutch residents; they would rather interact with 'someone like them' because they are worried about potentially being rejected by someone else. In their daily lives, their interaction is usually limited to people working in the language school or for the municipality, all of them are "very welcoming", but they are unsure about "other people […] we didn't go through any situation with them to know, 'are they rejecting, are they accepting?'" (D3_1)

Being not only a refugee, but a *Muslim* refugee appears to add another layer to this dynamic. Here, a few respondents refer to other 'Arabic' communities (especially Moroccans) who "make a lot of problems here" (D3_2) and thus have created a negative image of 'Arabs' which is then applied to

refugees from Arabic countries. This image may further fuel the 'fear' some residents hold towards newcomers. A respondent from Yemen (D3_2) positions himself against these images by highlighting that he and his wife are open and that "men can marry men, women can marry women" is normal for them. He states that he does not feel like a refugee because "in the Netherlands everyone is the same. I eat like a *Nederlander*, I live like a *Nederlander*, the same house, and almost the same salary."

Another respondent mentions that his daughter could not "mix with the community because she is wearing a headscarf." And when he walks with his wife in the center and they encounter a group, they reply coldly to his 'hello'. His wife doubts if her headscarf is actually the reason for the cold reply, but he adds that "they think I forced you to put the headscarf on." (D5_2) They have also been asked if they have restaurants and hospitals in their country or if women shower with their headscarf on – questions that seem surprising and somewhat hurtful to them. A woman from Eritrea similarly describes how most people greet her, but a few do not because "they do not want foreigners here"; her children sometimes asked her "'Why did they not greet you back, Mama? What did we do?'" (D6) She finds it difficult, but acknowledges that "everyone has their own life, their opinion, we cannot determine that. But also in our country, not everyone is good. Some people are nice, some are not."

Overall, the research participants did not mention any major/openly physical or verbal incidents of discrimination, but their narratives show rather sublet forms of rejection (in the form of not saying hello, for example) based on people's (presumed) attitudes, posing a barrier to interaction.

Social dimension (individual and group-related factors)

We now turn to the discussion of some **individual factors** influencing people's lived experiences of in- and exclusion and their interactions with others. Similar to the other localities, respondents in locality D point out that it is generally more difficult for older people – especially for the ones who did not go to school and lived in rural areas – to learn the language (D5); conversely, it is easier for children "because they grow up here, they will learn about the culture." (D6)

Another factor is a person's **family situation**: for example, a respondent from Eritrea with three children notes that she has a lot of contact with people from the Netherlands because her children are all member of a sports club and there, she meets other (Dutch) people (D6). Moreover, she – and others – emphasize that working is important because their children look up to them (D6, D7). Having a family thus shapes a person's lived experience in various ways – by motivating them to be a good role model and by 'facilitating' contact with others.

Moreover, perceived **cultural differences**, related to a person's ethnic and religious background, influence how interactions with other residents are experienced. For example, according to both women from Eritrea there a culturally speaking big differences between their home country and the Netherlands. One of them (D6) explains the difference as follows:

"For us, when someone comes, they are always welcome. Here, you have to make an appointment. In the morning, we would open our doors and neighbors would come by to have a coffee and a chat with us. But here, you live by yourself, and you cannot just go to the neighbors and the neighbors come by. This was very difficult for us, but we have to get used to it. The cultural differences between us and the Netherlands are big."

Experiencing these differences was, especially in the beginning, very difficult, and led to disappointment (for example, when neighbors did not accept the invitation) and to the realization that "everyone is separate here" (D6; D1, D7); or as another respondent puts it: "in the Netherlands, it is not so easy to make contact" (D7). Respondents note that they want to accept and adapt to these differences, while at the same time retaining some of their own culture (D6).

Other individual factors include a person's **duration of stay** – respondents who arrived recently have different experiences and expectations because they for instance only just started to learn the language; and a person's **educational background** and related aspirations – for example, persons with a university degree appear more willing to move to a bigger city to find a job in their sector because they feel that the locality does not offer such opportunities. Lastly, **language skills** (again related to other factors influencing the ability to learn the language) may shape interactions because people with better (English or Dutch) language skills seemed more confident in communicating with others.

Finally, regarding **social, group-related factors** respondents point out the importance of having a stable social network and ideally a person who speaks the same language to make sense of the new environment and to spend time with (D1, D6, D7). Moreover, non-public service providers, the local welfare organization and the municipality are seen as crucial actors to help with administrative tasks, but also to facilitate interactions through spaces such as the multifunctional neighborhood center. As previously mentioned, while the overall atmosphere in the town is a bit ambiguous with some people not being accepting of refugees, most respondents feel supported and welcomed by the organizations working with them, by volunteers and by their friends/family or neighbors. Nonetheless, as has also been pointed out, the support provided by the national NGO is seen as insufficient.

Brief summary of main insights

Our findings in this small rural locality, where only 9% of residents has a migration background, have in common with other localities that there was again an ambiguous attitude regarding the acceptance of newcomers, and a problematization of both labor market opportunities and the national dispersal mechanism having led to a lot of moving around for refugees.

Differently from other larger localities, we found a strong emphasis on the importance of 'neighborliness' and of following the same social norms as established by residents, expressed through anxieties about perceived different norms of keeping one's curtains open or closed during the day. Newcomers also referenced to the higher amount of old people in this locality, and they shared a discourse of residents (potentially) being scared of them. Relatedly, there were some requests for more explanations that should be provided to newcomers on how things work in this locality, but also more information for established residents about the accommodation and reception of newcomers.

As regards the support infrastructure, our respondents were rather critical of the services provided by the national organization that was commissioned by the municipality to advice newcomers, pointing to the limited time (one day per week) this advice is provided and to the fact that this organization mainly relies on volunteers who can lack language and professional skills. Conversely, in this small rural locality, there was high appreciation for municipal officials that acted as contact person for refugees.

4. Main findings in comparative perspective

Based on the conducted interviews and focus group discussions in the four localities, this chapter reflects on and discusses the main findings from a comparative perspective. The first section presents common and diverging patterns across localities with regards to reciprocal interactions and attitudes and migrants' lived experiences of inclusion and exclusion. The second section looks more closely at the role of the various dimensions – spatial, governance-related, discursive/political, and social – and outlines various opportunities and barriers for encounter in the localities and how these are perceived by migrants and long-term residents. The final section touches upon the current influx of refugees from Ukraine and how these new movements may have shaped attitudes and interactions in the localities.

The table below summarizes the key findings from the previous chapters and forms the basis of the following analysis, highlight both common and diverging patterns across the four cases.

		STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS	
		+	**-**
EXPERIENCE WITH CULTURAL DIVERSITY	**+**	**Locality A** **Medium size town** in Utrecht (West) + Sufficient job opportunities and educational institutions + Sufficient shopping possibilities + Well established public transport system + Well established support structure with high variety/diversity of NGOs/CSOs offering formal and informal support + Support of volunteers + Overall welcoming attitude + Presence of migrant communities - Difficulties finding qualified employment	**Locality C** **Small town** in Overijssel (East) + Sufficient educational institutions + Sufficient shopping possibilities + Well established public transport system + Support structure with NGOs/CSOs offering formal and informal support + Support of volunteers + Small and calm town, good for children - Difficulties finding qualified employment - 'Push' towards low-paid sector - Difficult contact with the municipality

		Difficulties establishing contacts with long-term residents due to language and (perceived) cultural differences - Influence of dominant discourses	- Difficulties establishing contacts with long-term residents due to language and (perceived) cultural differences - Influence of dominant discourses - Presence of segregated migrant communities
	-	**Locality B** **Small town** in South Holland (West) + Support structure with NGOs/CSOs offering formal and informal support, especially by local welfare organization and public library + Support of volunteers + Small and calm town, good for children + Proximity to the sea - Difficulties finding qualified employment - 'Push' towards low-paid sector - Difficult contact with the municipality/ service provider for employment - Missing train station - Few educational institutions - Difficulties establishing contacts with long-term residents due to language and (perceived) cultural differences - Influence of dominant discourses - Overall suspicious attitude towards newcomers due to smaller size and lack of experience with diversity	**Locality D** **Rural area** in Drenthe (North-East) + Support structure with NGOs/CSOs offering formal and informal support + Easy accessibility to services in multifunctional neighborhood center + Good contact with the municipality + Support of volunteers + Calm and safe rural area, good for children - Difficulties finding qualified employment - Insufficient job opportunities - Insufficient social support by national NGO - Poorly established public transport system, especially in surrounding villages - Few educational institutions - Difficulties establishing contacts with long-term residents due to language and (perceived) cultural differences - Influence of dominant discourses - Suspicious attitude towards newcomers due to smaller size, lack of experiences with diversity and older population

Table 8: Overview of all localities based on the Whole-COMM typology

4.1 Reciprocal interactions and attitudes, and migrants' experiences of integration

One of the main **common patterns** between localities with regards to reciprocal interactions and attitudes between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents relates to respondents' observation that getting in touch or interacting with (Dutch) long-term residents is not always easy. Both 'missing' language skills as well as perceived cultural differences seem to cause certain insecurities which may prevent people from, for example, seeking a conversation. Multiple respondents across localities

mention that they feel shy, insecure, or even ashamed of communicating with (Dutch) residents because they do not speak the language well enough (yet). Moreover, perceived cultural differences, for instance related to *how* to greet people or *how* to invite someone over for coffee, shape interactions because people are unsure on how to deal with these differences. At the beginning of their stay, some respondents tried inviting their neighbors multiple times, but their invitation was either not accepted or accepted with 'great delay' which in some cases led to disappointment and to the decision to not invite them anymore spontaneously. The latter reaction can be seen as a form of adaption to local norms/rules because "here, people usually make appointments to see someone" (D6) and "people are always short on time" (A6). Many interviewees refer in this context to the generally rather short interactions with neighbors who often limit the conversation to a quick 'hello'- 'hello'. It also appears generally easier to get in touch with Dutch residents who are already involved as volunteers and who, for example, support newcomers with their language learning. Volunteers are typically a bit older which is why respondents also point out that it is easier to find older friends.

Interactions with people from 'their community', including friends with a similar background or family, are described in rather different terms. Here, a shared language and similar experiences seem to contribute to feeling comfortable and supported. Most respondents' social networks comprise friends who have also recently arrived in the Netherlands (they met, for example, in the asylum seeker center or a language course/café) or friends/family who have migrated to the country a while ago. These contacts are seen as very helpful for guidance in the new environment, and to 'feel at home'.

More generally, in both interviews and focus group discussions, people displayed a rather strong 'us' and 'them' thinking. Yet, while many respondents referred to themselves as newcomers, foreigners or refugees as opposed to *Nederlanders*, they also expressed hope that this separation will become smaller or disappear in the future, particularly for the sake of their children whom they do not want to be seen and treated as foreigners.

With regards to reciprocal attitudes, respondents across all localities explicitly refer to dominant discourses and images about migration or *the* (Muslim) migrant/refugee. Importantly, they often make a reference to general discourses at the national level, but occasionally also to locality-specific discourses – which can admittingly not always be clearly separated from national discourses. Respondents across localities express similar thoughts here, for example, that people may hold negative attitudes towards them because of images created by the media which only focuses on the negative side of Islam or that people may be afraid of them because they are refugees and thus 'not normal'. Multiple respondents have also actively tried to respond to these images by acting in a certain way (staying positive, working hard) to show that 'we are normal people' and to shed a more positive light on newcomers. Here, the awareness of existing discourses and images indirectly shapes people's behavior and interactions. That is, they may not necessarily experience the presumed negative attitude of residents directly but *knowing* that these images and attitudes exist may have an influence on them and the way they act in the community/with others.

Regarding attitudes of migrants towards long-term residents or rather *Nederlanders* (Dutch people) in general, respondents express a relatively positive attitude: most *Nederlanders* are described as being

friendly (*aardig*) and the Netherlands is perceived as a welcoming country where everyone is equal and existing laws protect *all* citizens – instead of discriminating them. Respondents report incidents of discrimination and racism but often relativize them, for instance by stating that "there are racists in every country" (A5) and "80% of the residents are nice" (D6). Some respondents even show understanding for residents' negative attitudes because of the dominant media narrative on (Muslim) refugees and continue that they would perhaps react similarly if many foreigners came to their country. Lastly, many respondents express their gratitude for the Netherlands because they have been given a safe place to stay: "Thank God, if we were in Syria we would have been under the wrecks, but thank God, we have saved ourselves and we came here and we are comfortable, there are no problems or such, thank God. I hope that God makes all the Dutch people happy." (C4) Importantly, respondents also voice criticism about the system in place (for example, regarding the reception system or the lack of recognition of qualifications and skills) and emphasize that for them to be able to integrate, Dutch residents also need to show some openness and willingness to exchange and learn from each other (A7, B7, C5) because "a bridge cannot be built from one side only" (A7).

Questions about people's home country display at times ignorance which is perceived as rather hurtful (for example, when people are asked if they have hospitals in Syria), reflecting the importance of being seen first and foremost as equal human being and not as 'poor' refugee.

Overall, migrants across all localities describe experiences of inclusion, for example through the support provided by local organizations, the welcoming attitude of volunteers, colleagues, neighbors or more generally (parts of) the local population. Yet, they also experience exclusion, for example, more structurally from certain labor market sectors, but also socially in situations where colleagues or other parents do not include them in a conversation.

After looking at some common patterns of interaction across localities, we now turn to some reflections on **diverging patterns** in the four cases. When comparing attitudes towards post-2014 migrants and reciprocal interactions across localities, we find a rather positive and welcoming atmosphere in municipality A, and an ambiguous, leaning towards suspicious, one in the other municipalities. Municipality A differs from the other cases in terms of size, number of organizations and actors involved in the 'integration field' and the positively connotated presence of established migrant communities/migrant-led organizations. While respondents here also face the challenge of finding/making friends, they rarely state that residents have negative attitudes towards foreigners. This is, for example, different in the smaller towns B and D, where a suspicious attitude appears much more prominent and is often explained by the localities' small(er) size and a rather homogeneous composition of the local population who has 'no or very limited experience with diversity' and may therefore be afraid to interact with newcomers. Besides the lack of experience with diversity, respondents explain the presumed fear by referring to the Christian, tight-knit community who appears closed-off and distant (locality B) or to the larger share of old people in town who may 'naturally' be more likely to fear anything new (locality D). In locality D, the discourse on integration is moreover closely related to certain strong social/cultural norms and newcomers are often only tolerated on the condition that they would adhere to these norms. Social control and specific expectations towards newcomers' behavior appears to be much tighter here than in the other

localities. Interestingly, in locality C the presence of established migrant communities is rather problematized – as opposed to municipality A – by both long-term residents and newcomers (and also by some respondents interviewed for WP3 and WP4). The communities are here not necessarily seen as additional support structure because they appear to live rather separately and are perceived as 'not well integrated' themselves.

Besides population composition, the organizational landscape (also related to a locality's size) may also explain some of the diverging patterns: in locality A, there are more projects and places where interactions between newcomers and long-term residents are facilitated, and volunteers are actively mobilizing resources and support for newcomers (for example, via the aforementioned Facebook group). In the other localities, there are on average less organizations involved and respondents point out that there could be more activities or places to meet and establish relations with others.

To sum up, it appears more difficult for newcomers to feel welcome in smaller localities where people hold negative attitudes and where newcomers have often heard about the distant/closed-off community, while not necessarily experiencing it themselves. Smaller places may also have a different support structure in place with fewer services/activities or some services being only available in nearby (bigger) towns/cities. These differences in terms of infrastructure, social support structure and other governance dimensions will be discussed in more detail below.

From a **temporal perspective**, national discourses on asylum seeker reception and housing of refugees have hardened in the past year(s), leading to a polarization of the political establishment and local populations. The increasing politicization of the topic of migration – against the backdrop of one (perceived) 'crisis' following or accompanying the other – has also had its effects on the local level where the task of accommodating asylum seekers and refugees is regularly portrayed as exacerbating the current housing crisis – which, in turn, may affect how people feel towards the arrival of newcomers and how these feelings/attitudes change over time.

Some respondents mention similarly that people are less welcoming nowadays because more foreigners have moved to the city, and they are "not happy about the high number of people coming in" (B6). One respondent noticed that people stopped saying hello (C1). This narrative is also adopted by a few newcomers who appreciate that in 'their' locality, there are not so many other foreigners or who stress the importance of interacting with 'real *Nederlanders'*, especially for their children.

Overall, people mention the importance of time for their integration process – over time, they can improve their language skills, learn more about the new environment, gain more confidence in the interaction with others and 'enter' more aspects of social life, from starting voluntary/paid work, over joining various public activities to talking to other parents at their children's soccer game. Here, the Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions in place have had a detrimental effect not only on people's ability to speak the language, but even more so on their mental health due to isolation and loneliness. The pandemic thus has overall led to less contact, less opportunities to speak the language and less interaction. The time spent in the asylum seeker centers is similarly – if not more – perceived as a 'lost', 'wasted' and 'empty' time that significantly affects people's lived experiences.

4.2 Value of different dimensions in explaining and understanding interactions/attitudes/experiences

Spatial dimension

First, with regards to the **spatial dimensions** it can be said that size, location, and infrastructure of a locality play an important role in describing, understanding, and explaining varying experiences of inclusion and exclusion. For example, as a medium-sized town located in the center of the Netherlands, municipality A is well connected to other cities and parts of the country, and it has – from respondents' point of view – sufficient job opportunities and a well-established support structure. Most respondents express that they would like to stay because they feel overall satisfied with their living situation. Conversely, in the rural area in Drenthe (locality D), respondents state that there are not enough (qualified) job opportunities and the locality's general infrastructure is characterized by little shopping possibilities, a poorly developed local transport system, and few educational institutions to choose from – especially in the smaller surrounding villages. Yet, people appreciate the calmness and safety of the town and the concept of *naobarschap*, that is, neighbors helping and looking after each other. Respondents in localities B and C follow a similar narrative: most of them like that the towns they live in are not too big and thus *rustig* (calm), but they are also concerned that there may not be sufficient jobs in the sectors they would like to work in.

Governance dimension

Second, **governance-related factors** play another important role in shaping people's experiences in the Netherlands as well as in the four localities. Based on the narratives of most respondents it becomes clear that the **national dispersal mechanism** in place has had a rather negative impact on their arrival process in the Netherlands because they had to spend a substantial amount of time in various asylum seeker centers, thereby losing valuable time. Moreover, some respondents were not particularly happy about the municipality they were (initially) assigned to and some of them felt that their wishes were not taken into consideration. Yet, overall the majority of respondents appeared to be satisfied with their current living situation and had no immediate plans to move somewhere else (also knowing that moving to another municipality is not that easy due to long waiting lists for housing).

While experiences with the reception system can be considered rather universal, the perception of the **local support structure** differs in some instances rather significantly. One of the main differences observed relates to the 'social support' offered to refugees: Municipalities A, B and C have one *local* organization offering support; these local organizations are permanently physically present in the three localities and thus very accessible and reachable. Refugees in the localities usually have one clear reference person who guides them over a period of up to three years if needed. Respondents perceive the support offered by these local organizations as very helpful which positively contributes to their experiences in the localities. This is different in municipality D where the system is described as rather fragile and not very supportive because of the lack of continuity and regularity in the services that are being offered. Instead of working with a local organization, the municipality has transferred the task of social support to a national NGO that is not permanently present in the locality and primarily works with volunteers. Respondents have expressed the wish for more stable services and one contact

person who knows their case well. Yet, contrary to the other three localities, municipal officials in locality D appear to be in much closer contact to newcomers which is, in turn, perceived as helpful.

Lastly, (un)**employment and economic conditions** in the localities can be seen as crucial factors shaping people's integration experiences and their everyday lives, both positively and negatively. Almost all respondents across localities mention difficulties to find paid and – importantly – qualified employment. In many interviews, respondents express that they feel underestimated and point out that they are not given a (proper) chance to work and that their previous experiences and qualifications are not recognized and appreciated. For respondents with a university degree or a similar qualification, it appears particularly difficult to find jobs that correspond with their educational and professional background; the experienced or expected economic downward mobility often conflicts with their personal aspirations to 'go further' and build a life and career in the Netherlands. Looking at the current situation of most respondents, only very few have a full-time qualified employment, some have started working in the low-paid sector and others have been doing voluntary work for years. The latter also relates to the aforementioned 'voluntary work trap' where employers gladly accept that people are doing voluntary work (here, language does not seem to be a problem), but if they ask for more, they are being told that they cannot be paid for the (same) job because of a missing diploma and insufficient language skills (locality A and C).

Importantly, while difficulties in finding paid and qualified employment were mentioned in all localities, there are also substantial differences between people's experiences. For example, in localities B and C respondents mention that they are often 'pushed' towards working in the low paid sector, that is, the municipality made it clear to them that they should start working as soon as possible, typically in jobs in the supermarket, cleaning or logistics, or otherwise their social welfare benefits could be reduced. In locality C in particular, the collaboration with temporary employment agencies has led to people working under temporary and precarious working conditions that leave little room for (financial) growth and long-term predictability. Here, the municipal approach towards 'integration' is at odds with people's personal aspirations, thus shaping their lived experiences of – in this case – exclusion (from certain segments of the labor market) and 'hindering' their integration.

In locality D, the municipality's approach is described as rather 'soft', giving people (more) time to learn the language first. Here, some respondents started working 'voluntarily' in the low-paid sector (logistics, cleaning, tourism) to slightly increase the monthly budget, gain some work experience, or improve their language skills. However, they soon realized that there were either no colleagues to talk to or they had difficulties joining the conversation (because people were not willing to speak slowly). Two respondents working in locality A, on the contrary, are very content with their work situation, they were able to find a qualified job quickly and experience the interaction with colleagues as positive.

Discursive and political dimension

A third important factor shaping people's interactions, attitudes and experiences are political and media-driven **discourses and images.** As mentioned in the previous section, respondents across all localities explicitly refer to dominant discourses and images about migration or *the* (Muslim) migrant/refugee. While they often refer to general discourses at the national level, they also explain

how these discourses and images affect their lives in the localities. For example, they are aware that people may hold negative attitudes towards them because of certain images created by the media or people may be afraid of them because they are refugees who fled a war and may 'have problems in their head' (D1). This is why some respondents do not actively seek the encounter with (Dutch) residents to 'avoid making them feel uncomfortable'. Interestingly, this behavior 'clashes' with often implicit expectations from the so called 'host-society' that newcomers should 'mix' and reach out to them. This became to some extent visible during the meeting of Dutch volunteers in locality A where some volunteers stated that they always had to take the first step. Looking at respondents' narratives allows us here to shed a more nuanced light on such situation, namely that 'not reaching out' may also be related to a fear of rejection (due to one's background) and the consideration to 'not make others feel uncomfortable' (and not to a lack of interest or initiative).

While these references to discourses were made across localities, respondents in locality B and D mentioned negative attitudes of parts of the local population towards refugees more often and perceived the local community as more separated between 'us' and 'them'.

More generally, the **politicization** of migration can both be obstacle or facilitator for integration. For example, in locality C and B, the arrival of newcomers was quite politicized in the past and met with local protest, but it also led to volunteers actively being involved in the field, eventually providing additional support for newcomers in their integration process. Politicization can also influence local governments to take more restrictive measures and dedicate less funding to the topic – or vice versa. In locality A, the topic of integration is positively connoted and has a high priority on the political agenda – an aspect that respondents related positively to the well-established integration-related infrastructure in place. In locality D, the arrival of newcomers is also politicized, but more in cultural terms because newcomers are often framed as 'deviators' from the norm who challenge the commonly accepted notion of 'the good life' reflected in tidy gardens and open, transparent curtains. Yet, the municipality dedicates funding and attention to the topic of integration and has not taken more restrictive measures, contrary to locality C where the overall problematization of migrants is also reflected in a rather strict approach to immigrant integration.

Political leaders, in particular the alderman responsible for integration, appear to have an important role here, too, – as shown in the other country reports – but this aspect is less mentioned by the WP5 respondents themselves who rarely refer to the political establishment in the locality.

Social dimension ((individual and group-related factors)

Lastly, people's experiences are also shaped by the **social dimension** which comprises both individual-level and group-level characteristics. With regards to the latter, respondents highlight the important role of their personal social network, comprising friends and family, and that of local non-public (civil society) organizations. As previously mentioned, the non-public service providers offering social support to refugees are seen as particularly helpful in localities A, B and C. Here, it appears important to have one clear reference person and sufficient explanation and information about 'how things work'. This guidance is perceived as essential because a new country can be like a "desert" in the beginning (D5_1) and people lack 'orientation'. Besides provision of explanation and information,

organizations also connect newcomers to the community via buddy programs, language activities or other projects. Neighborhood houses (run by local welfare organizations) appear to play an important role here since they do not only cater to migrants' needs, but address all resident, thereby creating a space where people from different backgrounds can meet. Locality A has – both due to its size, but also due to its overall welcoming attitude – many different actors offering services to migrants and refugees. In locality B, the public library plays a particularly important role with its organization of various language activities and courses. Nonetheless, respondents point out that there could be more spaces to meet. In locality D, the multifunctional neighborhood house is seen as an important place for people to receive support, but also to meet others. Importantly, some respondents also stress the importance of having a space where they can meet, for example, to celebrate their religious festivals or come together in bigger groups with 'people like them'.

Besides group-level characteristics, various individual factors influence how people experience their arrival and integration process in the localities. Across localities, respondents mention similar factors which is why their role is not necessarily locality-specific but rather universal (that is, they apply to respondents independent of the locality they live in).

First, **age**: according to our respondents, it is more difficult for older people to learn the language and to get used to the new environment. They often had more to lose in their home countries and may consequently find it more difficult to start all over again. Conversely, respondents state that it is easier for children because they learn the language faster and are from the beginning in touch with Dutch children, thereby learning about 'their' culture and getting accustomed with ways of living in the Netherlands/in the localities.

Second, **gender**: we showed that access to the labor market is generally difficult; based on observations made in the fieldwork and during interviews, we see that access is even more difficult for women who have children and are not available full-time and have less flexibility regarding their schedule. Moreover, some women did not work in their home country, making their career choices in the Netherlands more difficult. While taking care of children may impede access to the labor market (for women) – thus forming a 'barrier' to labor market inclusion – having a family may also form a positive opportunity to get in touch with others – thus facilitating inclusion. It often appears easier for persons with children to meet and interact with others (parents, teachers etc.). Furthermore, children seem to play an important role in people's decision to stay in a particular locality, that is, they may be a reason to stay in smaller places despite poorer socio-economic conditions because their safety has priority. This decision reflects the idea of the 'safe' village where everyone knows each other as opposed to bigger, more anonymous cities where children may be more likely to be surrounded by and/or consume drugs and alcohol.

Third, **ethnic and racialized background**: here the perceived ethnic – and often related, (ascribed) religious – background, particularly regarding the 'external' perception by residents, plays a role in shaping newcomers' experiences in the Netherlands/in the locality. For example, Muslim refugees may be perceived in a certain way which then influences their way of interacting, potentially also preventing interaction. Moreover, (perceived) ethnic/cultural differences may also lead to misunderstandings or

feelings of disappointment, leading to a potential readjustment of people's expectations and their behavior. More generally, multiple respondents across localities state that by 'behaving according to the rules', 'working hard', or 'staying positive' (Dutch) people will see that they are 'normal people' of whom they do not need to be afraid of. Relatedly, multiple respondents mentioned experiences of racism and discrimination due to their (assumed/ascribed) background; experiences that are seen as being reflective of a certain attitude among some residents. Experiences of racism and discrimination range from being looked at 'in a strange way', over being asked to take the headscarf off, to people changing the side of the street "when they see me" (A5 from Eritrea).

Fourth, **legal status**: based on our analysis, we see that a person's (il)legal status determines access to rights, resources and services and thus has a significant impact on people's lives. For people who do not fall under the category of 'recognized refugee', their lives may play out very differently and barriers are (even) higher. For example, without a status, a person cannot access language courses, which impedes the communication with others in Dutch, often resulting in experiences of exclusion.

Fifth, **educational background**: a person's educational (and relatedly professional) background has proven to be a major influence on people's lived experiences. It often forms the basis for personal career-related aspirations, thereby informing decisions to stay in a municipality or not. It may also influence a person's decision to accept any (low paid) job which, in some cases, may contradict their actual aspirations and lead to experience of downward mobility and thus frustration. While people with a higher educational background appear to learn the language easier and often have a clearer idea of what they would like to do in the Netherlands, their educational/professional aspirations may also make it more difficult for them because the jobs they desire are not always accessible or available. Interestingly, these personal experiences seem to contradict the popular assumption that refugees with an academic background integrate easier (because of their ability to pick up the language quicker and/or because it is assumed that they can easily find a job).

Lastly, **duration of stay**: based on our analysis, we see that people have different priorities and evaluate their personal situation differently over time. In the beginning, people may be primarily concerned with learning the language, understanding, and adapting to the new environment/system and establishing some first contacts with (Dutch) residents. When someone has already lived in the locality for a longer time, the awareness for other, underlying dynamics may increase, for example related to the realization that persons with a migration background – also the ones living in the Netherlands for a very long time – are often disadvantaged on multiple levels; this may lead to concerns of what this may eventually also imply for their children, reflecting the fear that "they may always be seen as foreigners" (B6). Yet, most respondents state that 'it gets easier over time' because the context becomes more familiar, and they speak the language better. This, in turn, also relates to the social ties people establish over time in the locality.

In the beginning, interactions between newcomers and long-term residents usually take place in a more formalized/organized setting, for example when newcomers meet volunteers in a language café, via other organized activities such as buddy projects or via their voluntary work. While the interaction is often initiated via an existing support structure in place, some respondents have eventually started

to refer to the volunteers as their friends/close contact persons. In some cases, respondents have developed a closer relation with their neighbors – beyond the occasional 'hello'; they drink coffee together or even have family-like relations with their neighbors (D6). Once people live longer in a locality, it seems that they also interact with (Dutch) long-term residents in more spontaneous settings, such as at the children's school or during a sport event. Consequently, respondents who have lived in the municipality for longer appear to be better connected to long-term residents.

The *frequency* of interaction also heavily depends on the type of relationship people have. In the more formalized/organized setting, interactions can happen on a very regularly basis such as once a week; the contact with neighbors often appears rather sporadic and many respondents express that it would be nice if neighbors accepted their invitations more often. Besides the frequency, the *quality* of interaction appears relevant, too. Dutch volunteers have throughout the interviews been mentioned as having had a very positive impact on people's arrival/integration process because they helped newcomers with their language, supported their children or helped them understand the new environment by explaining 'how things works'. These positive experiences/interactions have, in turn, also often shaped the picture of the general local population as being 'friendly and welcoming'. Contact with other migrants is perceived as equally important, both because they often speak the same language and because they have been through similar experiences and understand each other. Most respondents' social networks consist primarily of people from the same country or other migrants/refugees/family.

Reflections on the Whole-COMM typology

To sum up, we now turn to some final reflections on the relation between migrants' personal experiences and the perception of their integration and localities' structural conditions and experiences with (cultural) diversity (two dimension of the Whole-COMM typology).

First, **structural conditions** (economic and demographic profile of a locality), and in particular the (un)availability of job opportunities, can be seen as important factor influencing migrants' perception of their integration and potentially also their decision to stay in or leave a locality. Here, smaller municipalities such as locality D appear 'disadvantaged' because there are often not enough (qualified!) job opportunities which could attract people to stay. While many people – especially families – appreciate the calmness and safety of smaller places, advancing their own career or their children's educational/job-related opportunities often takes priority. In other words, many respondents would consider moving to a bigger city with more opportunities for educational and professional growth once their children are older (also mentioned by respondents in municipality C). Here, municipality A seems more attractive – especially for younger people – due to good labor market prospects. Other infrastructure-related factors such as difficult accessibility (via public transport) or fewer medical and educational institutions have an impact, too, but to a smaller extent. Consequently, structural conditions marked by a stable or improving economy appear to matter in people's decision to stay or leave because respondents attribute work, and especially paid and qualified employment, a high relevance, closely related to personal satisfaction and prospects for desired socio-economic upward mobility.

Second, the influence of a locality's **experience with diversity** has less of a clear-cut impact. In both the medium size town in Utrecht (A) and the small town in Overijssel (C) more than 25% of the local population has a migration background. Yet, the presence of migrant communities in these localities is experienced very differently by respondents. In locality A, it is seen as helpful, in locality C less so – here, migrant communities (from, for example, Turkey or Morocco) are rather problematized and seen as not being well integrated themselves. Individual contacts with similar background and/or family appears more important here. In locality B and D, there are significantly less people with a migration background which, according to respondents, may explain residents' suspicious/negative attitude towards newcomers because people are not used to foreigners; here, unfamiliarity and uncertainty appear to be defining elements of interactions, making it more difficult for people to feel accepted. Nonetheless, migrant settlement before 2014 does not in all cases 'equal' an overall better interaction/contact with local residents and a lack of experience does not automatically result in, for example, a less developed support structure. In all four localities, respondents note that it is not always easy to get in touch with (Dutch) residents.

More generally, feeling welcome in a community appears to influence people's decisions to stay/leave as well – but only to a certain extent because also in the light of discrimination, racism and other forms of rejection, people usually differentiate between the small minority of people who act like that and the majority 'who are nice and welcoming'. As has been shown above, respondents continuously refer to residents potentially holding negative attitudes and being 'against' newcomers in their locality, but this was seldom seen as a reason to leave the place. Job or educational opportunities (the latter especially for younger people) seem to have a more influence here.

Another reason to stay/leave a locality, relates to existing family ties: respondents pointed out that they would move to another city to be closer to their family or try to bring their family to where they are currently living. Finally, as discussed above, other locality specific characteristics, including size, proximity to nature/sea, existing support structure and activities, contribute to a positive/negative experience in the locality and may eventually partially inform a decision to stay or leave.

4.3 Impact of Ukrainian refugee crisis on social interactions, individual attitudes, and integration experiences in SMsTRAs

As shortly mentioned in the case analysis, all four localities currently host refugees from Ukraine and have allocated resources to accommodating and supporting them. The situation of Ukrainian refugees was mentioned in informal conversations with volunteers and employees (for example of the local welfare organization and the library in locality B, or the local NGO for refugees in locality C) who expressed that it is difficult to understand why refugees from Syria and other countries have to wait for much longer and are not given access to the labor market, while many Ukrainians can work immediately after their arrival. This differential treatment seems to be especially difficult to grasp regarding refugees with a higher educational background and work experience. People criticize here that refugees' diplomas are often not recognized, and the focus lies (too much) on language learning; instead, people should start their labor market integration earlier, as it happens to be the case with many Ukrainian refugees.

This view is shared by one respondent in locality C:

> "The Ukrainian people, they came to the Netherlands not as refugees but as European people, that is good, they have their own documents available and they can start working directly, so they have a normal life and can go further. But in our situation, we have to wait and wait and wait. If we had this opportunity to go further with work and normal life, we would have no problems. […] I have my own Dutch driving license, I have also a safety certificate to work, I have done everything, but I cannot work, I have to wait, but why?"

Overall, during interviews conducted with respondents for WP5, the topic did rarely come up by itself; a few respondents mentioned the war in Ukraine, stating that they were concerned about the situation there: "When the war happened in Ukraine the whole world was concerned. We are not even done yet with the Syrian war then we have the Ukrainian war which affects the whole world. We can do nothing except trust in God, God is generous." (C4) Another respondent from Yemen expresses similarly her worries and empathy: "Hopefully, Russia will not do the same to Europe. When we heard the news, it reminded us of our country, and we got scared. Are they following us? Or is it just bad luck? Hopefully, peace will be everywhere. We understand what Ukrainians feel like."

Many respondents did not seem aware of any Ukrainian refugees in their locality or did not know about their situation. Yet, when asked directly, some were more expressive about their thoughts.

> "I do see differences. People from Ukraine get everything. […] I understand that is their right, I want it for them too, I know what war means, what it means to have to leave your country. […] I am not angry, but I am sad for myself. But I am happy for the Ukrainians. There are also many Arabic countries who did not welcome us. But the Netherlands said 'welcome', this is important for us. But we also deserve good things and a good environment, and that people treat us well. I am not angry with them; they are also refugees like me. […] The difference is very clear. Some people say, 'yes because they are from Europe, and you are not.' Some people are scared because of the different culture, there are many Arabic people in the Netherlands and some people are scared that they have to change their culture, their way of life, but we do not want that. We are not here to change anything, we come for a better life." (B5)

> "There is a very big difference. You can notice it everywhere. […] I feel for people from Ukraine that they had to leave their country; this is not good. I know because I have experienced it myself. But the difference is very clear. It comes from above, not from the people in the neighborhood, but really from above, from the ministry. […] Why is one group being welcomed with such open arms and everything is given to them and the other group experiences resistance? […] You know, for Ukrainians, everything is so easy. I don't want to say that I am jealous, or I find it bad, but I find that such a big difference – why is that? We are all humans. […] People from Ukraine, they can immediately go to work, they don't have to follow all these steps. But it [Ukraine] is Europe, all European countries are one country. But when people come from Asia, they have a different culture and language, they are very different, maybe this is why they have to learn so many things first before they get something." (B6)

Based on these two quotes, it becomes clear that the two respondents are very aware of the differences in treatment between them – refugees coming from an Arabic/Asian country – and people fleeing from the war in Ukraine. While they express multiple times that they are happy for Ukrainian refugees for receiving so much support (because they know what war feels like), they also point out that it was much harder for them, and they would have liked to get the same support/chances as people from Ukraine. According to the respondents, the differential treatment is based on the perception of Ukraine as a European country as opposed to other countries (Arabic/Asian) that are perceived as culturally very different from Europe. These cultural differences may be perceived as a threat (B5) and as a reason/justification for the more difficult path refugees from the latter countries have to take. For example, they "have to learn so many things first" (B6) before they are allowed to work. This point also relates back to statements made by local volunteers and employees. The two quotes further show that respondents are emotionally affected by these obvious differences, they are torn between disappointment and sadness as well as understanding and empathy.

One important lesson that can be learned when reflecting on these statements is that people are well aware of the *racializing/discriminating discourses and practices* surrounding them which often place Europeans 'above' other (refugee) groups who come from other 'culturally different' parts of the world. These discourses and – relatedly – differential treatments impact to what extent people feel welcome and accepted in society as well as by political leaders/institutions which, in turn, shapes their lived experiences and interactions in the places they live in. Facing such obvious differences can lead to sadness and disappointment and exclusionary dynamics within a community. Here, it appears essential to shed light on the underlying assumptions of existing *racializing/discriminating* discourses and their consequences and to create a more positive narrative on newcomers from all countries.

A second lesson that can be learned relates to the nowadays often difficult and selective *access to employment* for refugees which often results in experiences of exclusion. The example of Ukrainian refugees shows that people without language skills and diploma may be able to find employment if there is a political will and openness on the side of employers. Given that almost all respondents attribute high relevance to paid (qualified) employment and that lack of employment opportunities may be a reason for people to move, it is worthwhile thinking of strategies to make access to paid and qualified employment easier for *all*.

Yet, lessons can also be learned from the settlement of refugees since 2014. For example, respondents highlight the *importance of information and explanation* regarding administrative as well as 'cultural' aspects for a smooth integration process. The latter aspect refers to more subtle explanations about 'how things work' in the Netherlands on a societal/cultural level, that is, how people interact with each other or what local norms and rules look like. Non-public service providers play an important role in providing such information, ideally via one clear reference person and on a regular basis.

Another point refers to the importance of offering sufficient, 'organized' spaces for newcomers and long-term residents to meet because spontaneous encounters are, especially in the beginning, less likely to happen and/or evolve further due to language differences. Here, neighborhood houses or public libraries play an important role in facilitating such encounters on a regular basis.

5. Conclusion

In this country report we sought to explore post-2014 migrants' experiences of settlement and integration in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas in the Netherlands. We have asked which factors facilitate and which hinder positive experiences. Furthermore, comparing insights from four localities, we sought to understand which role specific local contexts played in shaping individual attitudes, social relations, and consequently migrant integration experiences in SMsTRAs.

Some of the key **similarities** that we found across the localities are insecurities of starting a conversation and hence meeting Dutch residents as well as the ease and support effect of having interactions with people from one's own community. This was related to language skills and perceived cultural similarities/differences, but also to experiences of how others reacted to one's invitation to interact. Another factor that was mentioned across localities in similar ways was the role of discourses and images about migration and (Muslim) migrants/refugees and experiences of encounter where migrants either experienced kindness/openness or hostility/stereotypes towards them. We also found some **differences** between localities, especially as regards the welcoming/positive attitudes towards migrants. Our respondents linked such attitudes to the size of a locality, its degree of homogeneity or diversification, and the organizational landscape in a locality.

Factors facilitating **positive experiences** of settlement and integration of newcomers included:

- o   Larger size (not 'big city size'), higher level of population diversity and a more central location
- o   Permanent and accessible local support structures
- o   Governmental approaches that allow learning the language first and/or consider a person's educational and professional background with regards to future employment
- o   Positive connotation, political leadership, and high prioritization of integration on the local political agenda
- o   Neighbourhood houses that provide opportunities for encounters with residents

Migrants felt that the integration process was oftentimes easier for younger persons, for *recognized* refugees (as opposed to persons with a different or no legal status), for the higher educated (except for the frustrations this brought in light of unfulfilled aspirations), and for the ones who lived in the country for a longer time and hence often speak the language better.

There were also factors that led to more **negative experiences** of settlement and integration:

- o   Smaller size, a largely homogeneous population and peripheral location of localities
- o   The national dispersal mechanism that had implied for many to lose valuable time in reception centers while waiting for their status
- o   Difficulties of finding a job that corresponds with educational/professional background
- o   Governmental pressure of taking low-paid jobs or unpaid volunteering/internship positions
- o   Irregular and fragile local support structures
- o   Awareness of negative discourses and images
- o   Negative connotation, lack of political leadership, and/or limited attention for integration on the local political agenda
- o   Absence of spaces that provide opportunities for encounters with local residents

Some factors mentioned as having an exclusionary or disadvantaging effect for migrants were being of old(er) age, having a Muslim background, an irregular status, a limited/lower educational background, or having only recently arrived.

These findings can also be linked back to the Whole-COMM typology, and our findings allow us to speak to the relevance of structural conditions of a locality and its experience with diversity for post-2014 migrants' perceptions of their settlement and integration in SMsTRAs. As our findings show, a larger size (but for most *not* 'big city size'), a more central location in the country and, importantly, sufficient job (qualified/higher paid) opportunities were experienced as advantageous. However, as regards the higher diversification of a locality, we found a more ambiguous picture. In some localities, the lack of a sizable immigrant population was associated with a more negative or suspicious attitudes to newcomers. However, in one locality, the presence of large immigrant communities that came prior to 2014 was also considered as a problem, as these communities were not necessarily welcoming to the newcomers and being settled in neighbourhoods with a high share of migrants was considered as lowering opportunities for encounter with Dutch residents.

In light of the recent arrival and settlement of Ukrainians, post-2014 newcomers were acutely aware of the preferential treatment of Ukrainians and the underlying processes of racialization. Observing the ease with which this other group of refugees was given access to the labor market also highlighted once again the relevance of political will and openness on the part of employers.

Overall, we can conclude that SMsTRAs provide a particular context for newcomers to settle and integrate in in the Dutch context. While some factors may shape the experiences and perceptions of newcomers similarly across the Netherlands (such as existing discourses surrounding migration), our report indicates that some factors seem also peculiar to or particularly pronounced in SMsTRAs. According to newcomers themselves, the structural conditions of especially rural localities (often reflected in fewer job opportunities), the limited support infrastructure in some smaller localities, the often more conservative/suspicious attitude towards newcomers and the bright boundaries that were drawn based on perceived cultural differences, provided additional challenges and hurdles for newcomers to settle and integrate. However, some migrants – especially the ones with younger children – also appreciated the calmness and safety of smaller localities and the readiness of residents to help each other, painting a positive picture of these smaller localities in contrast to big cities such as Rotterdam or Amsterdam which are portrayed as too busy, too anonymous, and potentially harmful/unsafe for their children.

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Title (translation/*original*)	Date of enactment	Source
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Civic Integration Act 2021 *Wet inburgering 2021*	First adopted in 2020, applicable from January 2022	https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0044770/2022-01-01
Law Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers *Wet Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers*	Adopted in 1994, changes applicable from January 2020	https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0006685/2020-01-01
Hosing Act 2014 *Huisvestingswet 2014*	Adopted in 2014, Changes applicable from January 2022	https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0035303/2022-01-01
Participation Act *Participatiewet*	First adopted in 2006, Changes applicable from January 2015	https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0015703/2015-01-01/1

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Appendix

Table 1: Overview of conducted interviews, relevant for the WP5 country report

		Locality A	Locality B	Locality C	Locality D	
Number of respondents		8	8	13	11	40
Number of interviews		8	8	8	7	31
Gender	Female	4	6	5	7	22
	Male	4	2	8	4	18
Countries of origin	Syria	3	3	8	7	21
	Yemen	1	1	0	2	4
	Iran	1	1	0	0	2
	Afghanistan	0	1	0	0	1
	Guinea	0	0	2	0	2
	Eritrea	1	1	1	2	5
	Libya	0	1	0	0	1
	Turkey	0	0	1	0	1
	Egypt	0	0	1	0	1
	Philippines	2	0	0	0	2
Residence in locality	less than 1 year	0	3	0	3	6
	1-2 years	3	2	0	2	7
	2-3 years	0	0	4	3	7
	4-5 years	3	2	4	1	10
	more than 5 years	2	1	5	2	10
Age	20-25	1	1	2	0	4
	26-35	5	6	5	2	18
	36-45	1	1	2	7	11
	46-55	0	0	1	2	3
	> 55	1	0	3	0	4
Family situation	Married, no children	1	0	0	0	1
	Married with children	2	2	5	6	15

(interviewed couples are counted as 1)	Single' mother (husband not mentioned or husband not in the country)	0	3	1	0	4
	Divorced (with children)	1	0	0	1	2
	Living alone, but waiting for family to arrive	0	2	0	0	2
	Single	4	1	4	0	9
Legal status	Recognized refugee	6	6	13	11	36
	Rejected asylum seeker	0	1	0	0	1
	Family migrant	2	0	0	0	2
	Status via daughter	0	1	0	0	1
Level of education	Primary school	0	1	4	2	7
	High school	0	1	0	0	1
	Other qualification	2	0	0	0	2
	University (B.A. or M.A.)	5	5	5	5	20
	PhD	0	1	0	0	1
	No degree, but professional experience (educational level not mentioned)	1	0	4	4	9
Employment situation	Not allowed to work	0	1	0	0	1
	No work	0	2	7	5	14
	Voluntary work	2	4	1	3	10
	Internship/education	1	1	1	1	4
	Paid employment, but with uitkering	0	0	0	2	2
	Paid employment	2	0	3	0	5
	Paid employment in corresponding sector	3	0	1	0	4

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