

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Research conducted in the Netherlands as part of Whole-COMM has identified **four focus areas** for refugee integration policymaking in small towns and rural areas.

a) Promoting an integral approach to asylum seeker reception and refugee inclusion

In the Netherlands, asylum seeker reception and refugee inclusion are treated as two distinct policy areas. While the national government is responsible for asylum seeker reception and the issuance of residence permits, municipalities are responsible for refugees' housing, (civic) integration and employment. Our research shows that despite this formal separation, the policy areas are intrinsically linked and influence each other. We observe that lengthy asylum procedures, frequent relocations, and a distribution mechanism which does not always link refugees to nearby municipalities present challenges for refugees and local actors. The set up of the reception landscape often disrupts and delays people's integration, making it also difficult for local policymakers to connect to refugees early on.

Recommendation

These findings suggest the need for a better alignment between reception, housing and integration. Asylum seeker reception should be organized *regionally* to ensure refugees are connected to nearby municipalities. Moreover, asylum seekers should be given access to integration-related activities early on (including language courses, voluntary work, or employment). This would not only allow municipalities to connect to refugees earlier, but it would also enable asylum seekers and refugees to participate from the start. We also recommend regular (bilateral) collaborations and exchange between local governments and national organizations such as COA which are not always in place.

b) Acknowledging the relevance of local context and the role of non-state actors

The Netherlands follows a rather centralized approach to migrant integration, reflected in its national legal framework which defines tasks for *all* municipalities in the areas of housing, (civic) integration and employment. Despite this national framework, our analysis shows that municipalities adopt their own *localized* responses to refugee integration, by using the leeway provided within national regulations, by developing local policies and by choosing their (local) collaboration partners to carry out tasks. In terms of existing collaborative networks, we find that both formal as well as informal non-public actors play a crucial role in providing services, mobilizing resources and lobbying for more inclusive policies. However, also conflicts occur due to competing interests as well as unequal distributions of power and resources.

Recommendation

These findings suggest the importance of considering the local context – locality's size, economic and demographic development, political orientation or migration history – when designing and implementing integration policies and related tasks. While national policies can represent useful guidance, local



decision-making power and discretion remain crucial to give municipalities the opportunity to adapt national policies to specific local circumstances. Moreover, the national government should provide sufficient funding to enable municipalities to build sustainable service infrastructures and fund various non-public actors as they provide crucial support to newcomers.

c) Promoting sustainable employment

In the Netherlands, one of the main goals of integration policymaking is (fast) labor market participation. Our research reveals that labor market integration remains difficult in small towns, especially for refugees with a university degree. They often find themselves in temporary, precarious employment situations in low-paid sectors (agriculture, logistics or hospitality industry). The shortage of jobs in high(er) paid sectors conflicts with people's aspirations – leading to considerations to move – and challenges local officials to find adequate jobs for refugees. Other obstacles include lack of language skills, difficulties in diploma recognition, discrimination and local employers' reluctance to hire refugees.

Recommendation

Based on these insights, it seems crucial to invest in language learning and to consider people's long-term career aspirations in (local) strategies on labor market integration. Such aspirations could already be considered when allocating refugees to localities to make sure they live in or nearby municipalities where a larger variety of jobs is available. Moreover, local officials should be encouraged to design a long-term plan with refugees to meet their personal aspirations and ensure sustainable employment. Finally, local governments should partner with employers and raise awareness about employing refugees, in collaboration with stakeholders like trade unions to facilitate dialogue and address employers' needs and concerns.

d) Fostering social interactions between long-term residents and newcomers

Integration is often described as a “two-way street” concerning the entire local community. Yet, our research shows that across localities social interaction between long-term residents and newcomers only happens occasionally. Most local actors identified the separation between societal groups as one of the biggest challenges in their community. Refugees similarly mentioned that they had difficulties forming lasting relations with ‘Dutch’ people due to a lack of language skills and because they often did not feel welcome in the community. They further displayed awareness of the often-negative narratives surrounding refugees, preventing them from reaching out to others. Related factors leading to negative experiences include absence of spaces that allow for encounters with local residents as well as irregular and fragile local support structures.

Recommendation

Local governments should promote and institutionalize local initiatives and spaces where long-term residents and newcomers can meet and get to know each other. Here, it seems particularly important to engage both local stakeholders working with refugees as well as other local associations or clubs such as libraries, churches or football associations. Given the often-negative narratives on migration and people's feeling of not being welcome, it is crucial to design campaigns targeting local residents to shape a more positive narrative on migration and promote the idea of integration as an opportunity for community building. Local political leaders should be given a key role here as they occupy a central position in local (integration) governance networks.