



Refugees Re-Settled in Small Towns: Will they Stay or will they Go?

Lise Herslund*

Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

***Corresponding author:** Lise Herslund, Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark, E-mail: lihe@ign.ku.dk.

Received date: March 18, 2021; **Accepted date:** April 01, 2021; **Published date:** April 08, 2021

Copyright: © 2021 Herslund L. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Citation: Herslund L (2021) Refugees Re-Settled in Small Towns: Will they stay or will they Go? Global Media Journal, 19.56

Abstract

The recent paper "Everyday life as a refugee in a rural setting – what determines a sense of belonging and what role can the local community play in generating it?" published in Journal of Rural Studies explores into refugees placed in small towns in Denmark; their everyday life, what factors are important for whether they plan to stay and what role the local communities in the towns can play in this. The survey is based on 43 interviews in 2016/2017 with refugees and local volunteers in seven small towns. The refugees are mainly from Syria but also Eritreans, Iraqis and Somalis are part. The paper shows that the new everyday life and feelings of belonging is challenged by structural factors such as lack of cheap rental housing and transport options in the new rural settings and the fact that the refugees are often originally from cities and would have preferred to be settled in one. The refugees have very busy everyday lives commuting to language lessons and jobs most often far from the small town affording little free time to spend in the town. Some towns seem 'better at integration' and fostering local social relations than others. The development of local social relations depends on whether there are other migrants in the town as well as active local people helping refugee newcomers. Local volunteers can play an important role in helping refugees to navigate in their new everyday life, 'linking' them to the public sector as well as to the rest of the local community but they cannot do everything especially addressing structural factors like lack of cheap rental housing is a struggle.

Keywords: Refugees; Small towns; Belonging; Local social relations; Community mobilisation; Rural development

Introduction

Many small towns and rural areas experience depopulation resulting in empty houses and schools closing. At the same time migrants and refugees are becoming more common in rural areas thus giving new population and potential for development.

When the refugee influx was at its highest in 2015 several mayors from Danish rural and peripheral municipalities were quoted in the local press for saying that refugees presented the best opportunity in years for new development in peripheral areas. Rural areas have not traditionally been places where migrants have settled in high numbers and rural areas have over the years been portrayed as places of little diversity. However, recent figures show that international migrants are more frequent incomers to rural areas and especially in the Nordic countries rural areas are becoming more diverse in nationalities than the EU average [1]. In Denmark refugees have been re-settled decentrally for the last 20 years as refugees granted asylum have been distributed among all municipalities. Some refugees have then been settled in small towns and rural areas. However, research shows that the refugees initially placed in rural areas have moved towards metropolitan areas over the years to a larger extent than migrants in general [2]. Rural communities may also have very limited experience of in-migration and restricted resources from which to provide a response but they often have vibrant civil society and third sector groups. The paper is guided by questions such as: What are factors important for whether refugees plan to stay in the small towns where they are settled and what role can the local community play in this? The investigation is based on interviews with refugees and local volunteers in seven smaller towns in Denmark.

Will they Stay or will they Go?

The small town setting was initially not what refugees preferred. They feared loneliness and little diversity in the job market. What can be put on top of this is little diversity in housing. Lack of cheap/big enough rental housing has played a key part in refugees leaving but also in refugees staying. If you have a cheap good flat, there is a better chance you stay but also it is too expensive to move; to pay for a room/flat in a bigger town. Across the seven towns the refugees had been placed in different kinds of housing. Most refugees had been accommodated in different 'left over' housing stock either from public institutions not in use such as

kindergartens or nursing homes. They had also been placed in any kind of social housing, senior homes or youth residences that the municipality could dispose over. In one town an abandoned nursing home serve as home for more than thirty single men and couples was bought by a local entrepreneur who fixed it up and rented rooms out to refugees. Much of the housing stock; the dismissed institutions and rented rooms were suited for single persons or couples. If a refugee is reunited with his family the municipality are obligated to find a bigger home which often means that they have to leave the small town as no housing is available [3]. According to the local volunteers the first year was marked by a high turn-over in refugees moving in and leaving the towns again. Refugees mainly moved because the housing they had been placed in had only been temporary and others because they had been re-united with their families. A local volunteer said: "Our old nursing home has become a ghetto for those who cannot afford to move and it is a pity.... Families find it easier but we have no housing for them". The refugees are free to move away from the towns they have been re-settled in but will then have to find a cheap dwelling elsewhere and also pay for deposits etc. themselves which makes it difficult for many people to leave when they live on refuge benefits.

Stuck Between Urban, Associational and Virtual Life

The city background guides several refugees in where they would like to live and how they are used to moving around and using their local area. Most refugees were initially frustrated when they found out they were to be re-settled in a small town. Especially the refugees from Syria stressed that they preferred to live in cities because that was what they came from and was used to. A background with more informal and lively city life clash with small town way of life with few people in the street as well as a more formalised 'leisure life' and way of meeting and being together in associations and sport clubs. The idea, however, of what makes a good place to live seems not only formed by their own background but also by the opinions of outsiders both friends and family as well as the common narrative in the Danish society and media that rural areas are places of little opportunities.

When refugees are granted asylum and settled, they have to go to language school the first many months and later on vocational training or on-the-job training. These activities often take place in the centre town of the municipality or in even the neighbouring municipality and the refugees are thus very dependent on possibilities or public transport [4-6]. Their everyday life is stretched out and the use of the small town are initially very limited. On the question how they used and perceived their new town and neighbourhood, many said that a good neighbourhood had life on the streets and many meeting places, which they and especially the women initially missed in their new towns. On the question where your closest social relations are, most refugees said in their home country, in other European countries or even other places in Denmark as they often had made close friends in the asylum centre. They were in daily contact with people outside

on SMS, Facebook or Skype. Thus, developing local social relations seems necessary for making the small town have a chance of becoming a place of relevance in the lives of the refugees. The study shows that a local social life for the newcomers depends on whether there are other migrants in the area and whether there are active local people helping newcomers to navigate their new everyday life and in 'linking' them to the public sector as well as the rest of the local community and leisure life.

Can the Local Community Play a Role?

Common characteristics of the mobilisation around refugees arriving in the towns have been that 'new' people got involved, several activities were started up (collections, eatings, café/meeting places, lectures) and mobilisation and coordination took place also on Facebook. The urgency of the cause, the coverage in the media, and a more dynamic and loose way to engage seem attractive for 'new' younger locals not normally engaging and seeing themselves as part of the associational life and volunteering in the small town. This was, however, mainly in the beginning as it was easier to mobilise locals for collections and casual social activities than for continuous efforts. The ability to mobilise and organize is a key factor in the integration of refugees locally. However, this 'Facebook or pop-up volunteering' needs to be coordinated and kept alive by a more continuous effort. What characterise the activities in the towns still going strong seem to be the combination of still proactively looking up refugee newcomers, establishing more committed relations in the form of contact families and keeping up the physical meeting places like social or homework cafes. The towns 'best at integration' are those where there are other refugees and diversity in residents and those that do not just drink coffee and 'hygge' but those that more professionally run social cafés offering both practical help, language training as well as various advices. In the beginning it was more practical issues where advice on housing issues as well as jobs and gaining entry to educations are on the agenda some years after. This more professional approach depends on a few local persons also seeking advice outside the small town.

A Refugee is also a Newcomer?

The goal of the local activities appears to be to give the refugees a good start and help them in their new everyday life. It is a social project and not a development project to make them stay necessarily. The same applies to the approach at the municipal level. Where refugees may be linked to rural development at the political level (by mayors stressing the new possibilities) this is not reflected in the day-to-day management in sectoral departments and neither in the local communities.

Whether small towns can be places where refugees can have a meaningful everyday life is the question. The locals can do a lot and make a difference but they find it difficult to address all the issues raised by refugees. They can build local relations, help navigate and link up and seek new knowledge outside but they feel it is out of their league to find a solution to structural issues like the limited rental housing situation. The coming in of refugees

is not dealt with strategically as an opportunity for development by the local communities. As one local says “we have so many other issues to deal with to survive so we need to prioritise”.

Conclusion

Living in small town gives many of the same challenges for refugees as for Danes but structural factors are not so easily overcome when living on low refugee benefits. Mayors saw the influx of refugees as an opportunity to fill empty houses and schools but the housing stock initially appeals to single men and not families. The available housing stock in a town seems very determining for whether any refugees, how many and what kind of refugees are re-settled. Cheap rental accommodation is not in abundance in the smallest towns where the two bigger towns seem to have more and therefore more families end up here. It will take some years before refugee families can buy a house and a car which will make it easier to live in the smaller towns. Smaller towns are not easy to live in if you are not middleclass and can buy a house. It is probably too early to assess whether the newcomers left have become attached to place and integrated as integration is an on-going process still taking place. It is partly institutionalised

through municipality activities and NGOs but there is much room for local volunteers to play an important role in helping refugees out and making them feel welcome in the small towns.

References

1. Nørgaard H (2018) Hvorfor vælger indvandrere at bosætte sig på landet, hvordan oplever de at bo der, og bidrager de til udviklingen i en kommune med demografiske udfordringer 165-176.
2. Andersen, HS (2015). Immigration, integration and ethnic segregation: Developments in immigrant settlement since 1985.
3. Herslund L (2021) Everyday life as a refugee in a rural setting – what determines a sense of belonging and what role can the local community play in generating it? *J Rural Stud* 82: 233-241.
4. Herslund, L & G. Paulgaard (2021) Refugees' encounters with the Nordic rural. *Front Sociol.*
5. Wren K(2003) Refugee dispersal in Denmark: From macro to micro-scale analysis. *Int J Popul Geogr* 9: 57–75.
6. Woods M (2018) Precarious rural cosmopolitanism: Negotiating globalization, migration and diversity in Irish small towns. *J Rural Stud*,64: 164-176.