

Sponsorship in Rural and Small Communities

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*The **Knowledge Brief Series** is produced by the University of Ottawa Refugee Hub. The Briefs are intended to briefly summarize the global state of knowledge on topics related to community-based refugee sponsorship.*

I. Summary

Globally, the trend has been for both government resettlement programs and community sponsorship schemes to rehome refugees in urban and larger centers. However, as community sponsorship models have proliferated, and immigration policies based on dispersal models — particularly in Europe — have expanded, more and more rural and smaller communities have become involved in resettlement (SHARE 2019). Communities and regions outside of major urban centers face particular challenges when welcoming and integrating immigrants and refugees. While all newcomers require similar services — including affordable housing, language training, public transportation, internet access, healthcare, and other services — local authorities in rural areas are often operating in a context of fewer public services, less cultural diversity, aging and declining populations, and limited labour markets. Despite the challenges, rural and smaller communities are participating in resettlement programs, offering the newcomers positive resettlement experiences and finding creative ways around the barriers.

Focused on the role of rural and smaller communities in refugee resettlement, this knowledge brief uses a comprehensive desk review of relevant literature to ask: (1) How are rural and smaller communities participating in rural resettlement and integration across different models of sponsorship? (2) What are rural and small communities doing to welcome refugees, ensure community integration, foster refugee wellbeing, and encourage retention of newcomers? The results demonstrate that rural and small communities are actively participating in refugee resettlement and integration across the globe, and, in particular, “refugee sponsorship has been an important tool for getting small and rural communities involved in refugee reception” (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020:8). This brief examines the role of rural and small communities in sponsorship, the challenges and opportunities of rural resettlement, and strategies for rural and small places welcoming and integrating newcomers.

II. Rural resettlement

II.1 Defining rurality

Understandings of rurality vary widely across global, national, and regional contexts. The concept can reflect population density and distance from urban centers and/or a social construction of a specific history, lifestyle, and local knowledge (Gadsby and Samson 2016). Rural and smaller places can include agricultural regions, fishing villages, rural and isolated communities, and small cities. Because narrow numeric definitions often only account for a small number of rural places, some organizations and governments utilize a sliding scale of rurality based on population, remoteness, and distance to urban centers. For example, the UK Government offers six different categories of rurality across definitions of “predominantly rural” to “predominately urban” (UK Government 2017). This diversity of rural peoples and places has led, in some cases, to an expansive view of rurality which includes everything that lies outside of major urban centers (Parkins and Reed 2013). For the purposes of this review, rural and smaller communities are understood as places which lie outside of major urban centers and which receive fewer newcomers than their urban counterparts, and face many of the challenges associated with rural life.

II.2 Human challenges of rural resettlement

The challenges that newcomers face in rural places are largely the same barriers (although sometimes experienced differently) that all rural populations face, and may include limited transportation and other public services, aging populations, outmigration, and few services and employment options. In Canada, the UK, the United States, Australia, across Europe and other countries across the globe, rural populations face higher rates of poverty, limited labour markets, and a lack of access to basic services such as broadband and healthcare than people who live in urban centers (Bertolini 2019; Moazzami 2015). In this context, rural and smaller communities that welcome newcomers now face additional challenges including affordable housing, public transit and childcare, as they strive to meet the growing demand for services that are essential to the effective integration of immigrants (FCM 2011:12). Notably, newcomers can also face additional challenges associated with discrimination and racism when integrating into new communities (ROI 2017).

Other challenges include secondary migration (the voluntary movement of a refugee from their first settlement location to another location) and the sustainability of rural resettlement. In their efforts to prevent rurally resettled refugees from moving into urban centers, some jurisdictions have put specific policies in place. For example, Germany introduced an integration law that includes a residency requirement which gave state authorities the option to oblige refugees to stay in the assigned locality for up to three years (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020). Not all secondary migration takes place from rural to urban areas. There is evidence from Australia and the United States that some refugees chose to move to rural areas and support themselves, while others relocated with formal support from their community and/or local authority partnerships. Ensuring the sustainability of rural resettlement requires that all levels of government work with local community networks to establish employment opportunities, address service provision, create welcoming communities, and support sustained relationships between newcomers and other residents (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020).

II.2 Opportunities for rural resettlement

Despite the challenges, refugee resettlement in smaller and rural places can represent potential opportunities for both refugees and the new communities in which they settle. Some newcomers want to live in rural locations, and settlement outside of urban centers is ideal for those who prefer this option (Holley and Jedwab 2019). Successfully welcoming and integrating newcomers into smaller places can help rural communities meet their labour needs, sustain their population, and enhance diversity (Caldwell et al. 2017). While smaller communities may have less experience of hosting refugees, they can be excellent places of welcome. Notably, they can offer more affordable and better-quality housing options. Moreover, it can be easier to get to know neighbours, navigate public services, and secure employment in smaller places. Because of their smaller size, local authorities in small and rural communities are well connected, and newcomers can access this high degree of social capital to obtain employment opportunities and other services. Close contact with community members and volunteers can help refugees acquire language skills and utilize informal networks to identify opportunities. Some refugees move to rural areas to access economic opportunities and a rural lifestyle that is perceived as offering a better environment with lower crime rates, and discrimination than metropolitan centres (Marks 2014; McDonald-Wilmsen et al. 2009). However, challenges associated with rural life can and has led some refugees to leave rural areas (Driel 2020).

In the absence of many or all of the services generally available to newcomers in urban centres (such as public transport cultural amenities, settlement services, language services, etc.), reducing systemic barriers to services already available in rural places is important. Local authorities can reduce barriers by communicating positive messages about immigrants and refugees, providing learning opportunities to the public, organizing volunteer activities and networks, and providing additional information to refugees and their sponsors about social services that may be offered regionally or in neighbouring communities. Schools are a particularly important aspect of integration for newcomers with children. Community leaders and sponsorship groups can reduce barriers by working with local schools to facilitate parent orientation, encouraging teacher supports, and organizing volunteers to help in schools (ROI 2017).

However, it is also important to note that in some cases, newcomers to rural areas have found it particularly difficult to make social connections in their new communities (Phillimore et al. 2021). All community members, including sponsors, service providers, and local authorities, play an important part in fostering social inclusion and cohesion in rural and smaller places. They can take a lead in pre-arrival preparation activities such as providing host community education opportunities on culture, language, food, and socioeconomic conditions of the refugees' country of origin (SHARE 2019).

II.3 Community sponsorship in rural places

Across national contexts, of the newcomers moving into communities, refugees tend to need the most services and support (UNHCR 2011). Thus, resettling refugee populations into rural areas can be particularly challenging as they may need access to trauma services, additional medical care, and other therapeutic supports (Nunn et al. 2021). Because of this reality, rural resettlement may not be suitable for refugees who need specialized sociopsychological services.

In sum, community sponsorship programs can help communities and refugees address some of the challenges associated with rural resettlement. The volunteers and community cooperation needed in all community sponsorship schemes can be particularly useful in rural and smaller places where these networks are essential to the delivery of informal services, such as language training, driving refugees to services in other communities, and helping the newcomers to access available opportunities (Haugen 2019). There are also some specific actions that sponsors can take when integrating and welcoming refugees into their communities. These include: (1) working with the services that already exist, (2) building relationships within and across the community, (3) gaining political will by informing, educating, and gaining the support of influential community leaders, (4) inviting and involving refugees in key decision-making discussions, (5) working with researchers to ensure evidence-based decision making, (6) building capacity by working with the strengths and connections of those involved, and (7) recognizing that integration is a long-term project (Caldwell et al. 2017).

III. Country contexts

How rural and smaller communities participate in refugee resettlement and integration depends on: (1) national resettlement policies; and/or (2) the type of community sponsorship schemes in place. Expanding community sponsorship models have played a large role in increasing resettlement in rural regions, as have dispersal policies that promote the resettlement of refugees (through government resettlement and/or community sponsorship) in smaller cities and communities to prevent overcrowding in urban centers (Harjes 2021; Plug 2016). Below, the role of rural and smaller areas in community sponsorship is outlined for those countries that participate in the scheme. Each country has implemented or considered implementing a community sponsorship program or pilot initiative.

Australia

The number of newcomers living in rural and regional Australia - that is, all of Australia outside of the Australian Capital Territory, Sydney, Newcastle, the Central Coast, Wollongong, Brisbane, the Gold Coast, Melbourne, and Perth, as defined by the Australian Department of Home Affairs - has increased over the last decade due to the government's prioritization of rural resettlement (Ziersch et al. 2020). Introduced in 2017, Australia's community sponsorship scheme, called the Community Support Programme, prioritizes the resettlement of refugees who are willing to live in regional areas (University of New South Wales [UNSW] 2020). Australia's regional settlement policies are a response to ethnic concentrations in major cities and an effort to distribute the responsibility of resettlement more evenly between urban and rural regions. These policies are also a response to the challenges facing rural places such as declining populations, services, and labour forces. Research from Australia has found that successful regional resettlement depends on two main factors: (1) satisfactory employment opportunities; and (2) a "long-term commitment to creating sustainable refugee communities able to support newcomers and create an attractive social environment" (Schech 2013:608).

Belgium

Operating from 2017-2018, Belgium's Humanitarian Corridor Program is a partnership between the government and civil society groups. This type of agreement allows for the participation of a wide range of communities, including rural and smaller places. A majority of sponsors involved in the Humanitarian Corridors Program were local parishes located in small towns and villages that had no previous experience of hosting refugees (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020). To help communities adequately prepare to welcome and support the integration of refugee newcomers, Caritas International in Belgium has visited welcoming groups, offered group training sessions and ongoing monitoring of the program and support offered, and established a helpline that volunteers can call at any time with questions or concerns (SHARE 2019).

Canada

While most government resettled refugees are sent to urban centers, Canada's private sponsorship program allows sponsors to bring refugees into any community, large or small, regardless of its urban or rural location setting. Government assisted refugees are only sent to communities (largely cities) with a federally funded [Resettlement Assistance Program Service Provider](#), but privately sponsored refugees can be resettled anywhere a sponsorship group has formed. Since private sponsorship started in 1978, refugees have been resettled in small cities, towns, villages, and rural regions across the country (Labman 2016). Following the most recent large-scale resettlement initiative — the effort to resettle Syrian refugees that began in 2016 — over 350 diverse communities across the country have since welcomed refugee newcomers (Thomas 2020; Haugen 2019). Some research studies have found that while the lack of services, transportation, and cultural amenities in rural places poses some challenges with rural sponsorship, some communities and sponsors have found unique solutions to adversity, which has encouraged some refugees have to settle and rebuild their lives in rural areas (Haugen 2019; McNally 2020).

Finland

In Finland, a feasibility study that explored the introduction of a community sponsorship pilot program was recently completed. The study recommended that a diversity of municipalities welcome refugees through the pilot. In particular, the researchers contend that while resettlement in the countryside does present challenges, rural sponsorship networks offer refugee newcomers greater opportunities to be better connected into the community and to access service providers, than are offered to those resettled into urban centers (Turtianinen and Sapir 2021).

France

Similar to the experience in Belgium, most sponsors involved in the Humanitarian Corridors Program in France were local parishes in small towns and villages (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020; Tardis 2019). Despite the relatively small number of refugees admitted through the Humanitarian Corridors Program, the reception of refugees into rural places through the scheme has received significant attention, because the program can mobilize the distinct resources of smaller communities. Research has found that by immediately linking newcomers with community organizations, “sponsorship may help overcome barriers to integration typical of smaller communities that have more limited infrastructure and promote capacity-building in places with little prior experience with refugee reception” (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020:9). Caritas France has provided important resource supports to welcoming groups to help sponsors with little experience promote the successful resettlement and autonomy of refugees (SHARE 2019). Additional research found that, despite the challenges, small towns and rural areas can be places of hospitality, where refugees receive strong support from most locals (Tardis 2019).

Germany

In Germany, dispersal policies are favoured to avoid an overconcentration of asylum seekers and refugees in cities, where there are pre-existing challenges such as housing shortages and overstretched services. Newcomers are distributed between federal states based on the population and tax revenue of each state. Within each state, newcomers are sent to different communities based on additional criteria such as labour market prospects and family ties. Because of these dispersal policies, more than half of all refugees who entered Germany since 2013 live in rural places (Gauci 2020). In addition, Germany's community sponsorship programme allows anyone to form a sponsorship group, and refugees have been resettled into smaller communities through these groups (SHARE 2019). The resettlement efforts of smaller municipalities in Germany have been highlighted by global organizations. For example, [SHARE](#) organized a tour of the North Rhine Westphalia region for civil society organizations and municipal leaders. The region was chosen because of the exceptional work of local volunteers to integrate, house, and find employment opportunities for newcomers.

Italy

Local authorities have significant control over integration policies in Italy and offer rural and smaller places opportunities to be involved (Gauci 2020). In some cases, rural villages have been repopulated through immigration (Bunic 2016). For example, Riace, a small town in southern Italy, has enjoyed revitalization through refugee resettlement. With help from the Italian government, the community offers refugees abandoned apartments and training. This has helped to both repopulate the town and regenerate the local economy (Driel 2020). The town's residents are proud of their hospitality and see it as an integral part of the identity of their community. However, some challenges remain— notably a lack of sufficient and sustainable unemployment opportunities for newcomers in the longer-term, which has resulted in many newcomers leaving the community (secondary migration). The program largely depends on government funds and is not self-sustainable, making it reliant on continued government support (Driel 2020).

Norway

While Norway does not currently have a community sponsorship program, dispersal policies have resulted in the resettlement of increasing numbers of refugees into rural and regional areas. Research studies have highlighted some interesting findings about the integration of refugee and immigrant communities. Research suggests that many refugees initially express frustration at being resettled in rural localities, without having had any power in the decision making (Herslund and Paulgaard 2021). In an effort to address the new refugees' feelings of frustration and to facilitate their integration before arrival, Norway has instituted place-specific pre-departure orientation programmes for refugees waiting to be resettled. Beyond providing general information about Norway as a country, these programmes connect refugees and local stakeholders, and work to provide locality-specific information to newcomers (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020). Once resettled, the newcomers faced common rural challenges including a lack of services and public transport, and the resultant long commute times. Additionally, one study found that “former city-dwellers, with higher levels of education and job aspirations, find the small-town residency difficult, whereas refugees with rural backgrounds more easily feel at home” in rural Norway (Herslund and Paulgaard 2021:10).

Spain

While Spain's community sponsorship pilot initiative is limited to the Basque region (Instrategies 2021), refugees and other migrants have been increasingly living and working in rural communities across the country. Spain and Italy have the largest absolute populations of migrants living in rural areas in the European Union, largely due to dispersal policies and the employment of migrants in the agricultural sector (Commission 2019). [Media stories](#) have documented the formal and informal movements of migrants to rural areas struggling with declining and ageing populations. As has

happened in Italy and elsewhere, where housing is affordable and employment opportunities exist, new immigrants have helped revive rural communities. New organizations such as the non-profit “Towns with a Future Association,” have started working to connect refugees with small towns, in an effort to facilitate successful resettlement and integration (Harjes 2021). There is now also [a plan to extend](#) the Basque sponsorship program to other regions of the country.

Sweden

Sweden does not currently have a community sponsorship model; however, a scoping study was completed in 2020 for the introduction of a Swedish community sponsorship program (Tan 2020). Refugees resettled through the national resettlement program are sent to rural and smaller communities through dispersal policies, and smaller municipalities are actively involved in resettlement and integration (Hudson and Sandberg 2021). In Sweden, all municipalities — regardless of size — are required by law to accept and integrate a proportional number of refugees (Gauci 2020). While refugees who were resettled in rural and northern areas of Sweden benefited from the strong social connections present in these areas, others mentioned the long distances to urban centers, and the high cost of groceries and other goods, as significant challenges (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020).

United Kingdom

Launched in 2016, the community-based sponsorship program in the UK has given rural and small communities an opportunity to become involved in refugee resettlement. Over 150 sponsor groups have formed across the UK, many of which are in rural and smaller communities (SponsorRefugees 2021). A recent evaluation of the program found that while social networks were strong in rural areas, some challenges remain. Despite their social connections with volunteers, many refugees — especially women — felt isolated. Finding volunteer interpreters in rural areas was a particular challenge, although videoconferencing was used for some translation. Rural sponsor groups struggled to access language training for resettled refugees, and the lack of accessible transportation posed a challenge to mobility and independence. While many refugees may be keen to obtain a driving licence, their English language skills are often not to the level of proficiency required to pass the tests, which cannot be taken in Arabic (Phillimore and Reyes 2019).

United States

While most refugees in the United States live in urban areas, research suggests that some are choosing to move to smaller towns, primarily because of economic opportunities (Marks 2014). There is not a current community sponsorship program in the United States. However, in February 2021, President Biden signed an executive order to launch a private refugee sponsorship program. In October 2021, the State Department announced a new partnership with the [Community Sponsorship Hub](#) to launch the Sponsor Circle Program for Afghan refugees. This program is a form of private sponsorship and will enable individuals and community groups to directly support Afghan people who have been relocated to the United States through Operation Allies Welcome (US Department of State 2021). Additionally, the [Community Sponsorship Catalyst Fund](#) recently launched a funding program to support refugee sponsorship, which includes supporting volunteer agencies in regional centers

IV. Strategies for rural and smaller communities

In response to the challenges that rural and smaller communities face in resettling and integrating newcomers, governments and other organisations have developed a number of guides and toolkits outlining strategies for rural municipalities and sponsorship groups welcoming refugees. Publicly available resources include: [Attracting and Retaining Newcomers in Rural Communities and Small Towns](#) (Caldwell et al. 2017); [Planning for Migrant Integration and Inclusion in Smaller Municipalities: Lessons from a Berlin/Oxford Knowledge Exchange](#) (Alliance 2021), [Newcomer Engagement and Social Capital in Rural Communities](#) (ROI 2017). Regardless of jurisdiction or national context, there are a number of actions that rural and smaller communities can take to create welcoming communities, enhance integration, and support refugee resettlement and community sponsorship. Discussed below are some examples of such actions and strategies that have been organized through the Community Capitals Framework (CCF) and implemented within rural and smaller places across the globe. (Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer 2018; Beaulieu 2014; Mattos 2015). Rather than focusing on the community's deficits or needs, the CCF places emphasis on identifying and strengthening community assets i.e., the community's human, cultural, social, and political capitals. These assets (briefly defined below) may be underused, but with strategic planning, they can be reinvested to build greater community capacity, and therefore achieve community sustainability.

The CCF suggests that strategies, activities and best practices for promoting community investments should include a review of the community's four assets, or community capitals (human, cultural, social, and political). Activities to promote the reintegration and resettlement of refugees in rural and smaller centres could be structured to strengthen any one or all of these capital spheres. For instance, a programme to teach computer technology would bring together refugees and community sponsors, an investment that would foster opportunities for individuals to strengthen each of these community assets. This demonstrates how community activities build on each other to create bonds and bridges between and across different residents and groups, which helps rural communities become resilient in the face of challenges.

IV.1 Human capital

Human capital consists of the knowledges that individuals and groups acquire, for example, in their education and job training (Beaulieu 2014). These acquired and useful knowledge, skills and abilities are valued by society, because of their potential capacity to support social and community development. and to enable individuals to realize their potential and contribute to the social, economic, cultural, and political development of their new societies.

There are many ways for rural places to build human capital. For example, rural communities have been participating in capacity building and training programs, such as those provided by the [SHARE Network](#) in Europe. Such programs help prepare rural and small communities to receive refugees, while building human capital, and promoting social cohesion and inclusion more broadly. Locally, sponsorship groups in rural areas are finding creative ways to address service barriers, such as providing informal language classes to newcomers (Haugen 2019). For example, rural areas largely lack public transport, and a driver's licence is necessary to enable individuals to become mobile. However, for refugees, obtaining a licence often imposes cost and logistical barriers. To address these challenges, Saint Clar in Gers, a small town in France, used funds received from the government and the Occitanie region for the reception of refugees to help pay for driving school fees (Tardis 2019:48).

IV.2 Cultural capital

Culture includes the language, beliefs, values, symbols, stories, and rituals, in addition to festivals, museums, and other activities, that make up everyday life in a community (Beaulieu 2014). Possession of these assets facilitate social relationships, and foster opportunities for social mobility, higher status, and social inclusion. Local authorities of rural and small communities can help refugees and newcomers build cultural capital by, for instance, creating opportunities for residents to interact in

meaningful ways with newcomers. Organizing and hosting activities such as multicultural festivals, mentoring programs, and community social activities can help foster new relationships. For example, in the small community of Brooks, in Alberta, Canada, a number of community events are held to facilitate interaction between local residents and newcomers. The “[Faces of Brooks](#)” program was initiated to help capture and share stories from local residents and newcomers, and the “[Taste of Nations](#)” event showcases food from the different cultures living in the community. In Sweden, Local Action Groups started two projects called “[Meeting Place among the Baking Trays](#)” and “[People’s House](#)” to create new meeting places for rural Swedes and immigrants based around cultural activities. In addition, sustained efforts to deliver welcome packages to newcomers, to train and support community volunteers, and to invite newcomers to join and participate in recreation facilities and sports clubs can create lasting bonds between residents and newcomers, and which can enhance social networks throughout the community (ROI 2017).

IV.3 Social capital

Social capital are the connections and relationships made within, across, and beyond a community (Beaulieu 2014). The term refers to the shared social norms, values, trust, and sense of belonging enjoyed by community members, assets that make social interactions and inclusion possible. Refugees, immigrants, and other newcomers to a society often leave behind them the social capital they previously amassed as members of their former homes. The loss of social capital in their new homes can impede or restrict their ability to perform certain actions, for instance, open a bank account, and can result in their social exclusion and isolation. It can also slow rates of integration and adaptation and inhibit rather than promote social inclusion and belonging.

Rural and small communities can develop strong and accessible support systems to help newcomers overcome the challenges they may face in the absence of social capital. Local authorities can cultivate business and social networks; foster inclusive faith communities; connect community members to newcomers; provide formal and informal settlement services; connect with multicultural associations; and consider developing community and social services (ROI 2017). These actions can all help to provide newcomers with social capital as they are integrated into local networks and relationships.

Actions taken to build social capital can help retain newcomers who may move elsewhere if they are unable to access the services and support they need. Because formal services may be limited in rural places, building relationships between multiple actors such as local authorities, religious groups, and other civil society organizations is particularly important. Research suggests that civil society groups in rural towns and cities are “particularly well placed” to build social capital “because they are close to the host community and know the local leaders, who can influence the feelings and attitudes of the local people” (Gauci 2020:39). For example, research carried out in the rural region of Basse-Normandie in France found that one of the most important factors in building social capital in the region was initiatives started by migrants themselves. Inviting newcomers already living in the region to be involved in welcoming and integration activities can encourage social cohesion and build social capital (Gauci 2020).

IV.4 Political capital

There are several dimensions of political capital, including those in positions of power in communities, access to the individuals and organizations with resources and influence in communities, and developing new leadership and expanding citizen engagement (Beaulieu 2014). In its broadest sense, political capital means having the ability to affect political change, and to influence and implement standards, rules and regulations. Individuals with political capital can have access to decision-making power e.g., local, regional, and national government politicians and officials, and regional bodies.

Intentionally providing community leadership on issues of resettlement and integration is an important way to build political capital in rural and smaller centers. Local leaders can create a welcoming space for newcomers and enhance social capital in their communities by taking an intentional, sustained approach to community leadership (ROI 2017).

V. Research and policy initiatives – current state of play

Although governments, organizations and researchers have shown an increased interest in the resettlement and integration of refugees into smaller and rural places, it is the case that research, knowledge, and data in this area still lags behind that focused on urban resettlement. Even in Canada, where communities in rural and smaller places have been involved in private refugee sponsorship for decades, research remains sparse (Haugen 2019; McNally 2020). An extensive study on resettlement in small and rural communities in Europe concluded that: “Identifying general trends in small and rural communities’ experiences with resettlement is a difficult undertaking; the evidence base remains thin and scattered, these communities are diverse in their characteristics, and there are important differences in the design and operation of resettlement programmes” (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020:38).

In terms of active practice and/or policy-based projects on rural settlement, the SHARE (European Resettlement Network) SIRA project, co-funded by the European Union’s Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) was launched in January 2021. The project aims to strengthen and expand opportunities for the integration of newcomers (including refugees) in ten rural territories in France, Greece, Poland, and Spain, “through innovative approaches involving active participation of local communities, including refugees and migrants themselves, and piloting of grassroots social orientation actions.” (SHARE, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted resettlement programs across the globe. Rural resettlement was particularly impacted by the pandemic as smaller communities rely heavily on informal —largely in-person— activities when integrating and providing services to newcomers. The lack of accessible, affordable, and fast broadband in many rural areas further perpetuated these challenges. With these challenges in mind, and amidst budgetary uncertainty across jurisdictions worldwide, it is likely that resuming and/or expanding resettlement operations in rural areas will present significant challenges moving forward (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020).

VI. Knowledge gaps

Across jurisdictions, research on refugee resettlement and integration in the local context has tended to focus on urban spaces to the exclusion of on rural or smaller communities (Alliance 2021). As community sponsorship models proliferate, research is needed into the benefits, challenges, and outcomes of resettlement in rural and smaller places. Existing knowledge gaps regarding rural resettlement and integration are outlined below.

- The notion of ‘rural’ is a contested concept within the growing work on rural resettlement. While there is more research concerning small cities (Drury 2020; Agrawal and Sangapala 2021), research on rural regions and small towns and villages is lacking across all country contexts (Haugen 2019). Additionally, more knowledge is needed on the opportunities and/or challenges offered for refugee resettlement across the different rural contexts.
- Research is needed regarding the use of pre-departure communication and training practices, and how helpful these are in mitigating some of the challenges associated with rural sponsorship.
- Research on the impact of refugee arrivals on receiving communities, and the impact of receiving communities on refugees, is needed as more and more localities of different sizes welcome newcomers (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020:19).

- Longitudinal data and analysis of where refugees are being resettled (if they stay in their arrival community or move on to urban centers), and the integration outcomes of resettled refugees across communities of different populations, is needed.
- There is a lack of research into the preferred locations (e.g., urban, rural, small town, village) of refugees for resettlement or relocation.
- Gaps in service delivery and provision in rural areas persist across jurisdictions and national borders. The challenges that newcomers face in rural places are directly related to the decline of rural communities globally. Examining this reality is crucial if more countries are considering the resettlement of refugees in rural and smaller communities (Haugen 2019; McNally 2020).
- Research suggests that urban centers can learn from rural resettlement practices; however, rural to urban learning has not been widely explored or even seen as an option (Tardis 2019).
- Providing incentives to rural communities and/or employers to resettle and integrate refugees is an underexplored approach (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli 2020).

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