

12. ‘A spanner in the works’: exploring the relationship between provision of welfare and integration in rural areas

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INTRODUCTION – REFUGEE MIGRATION INTO RURAL AREAS IN SWEDEN

In this chapter we examine the parallel processes of rural municipalities receiving and integrating refugees and experiences of decreased access to physically placed public services from a rural justice perspective. We aim to expose how the perceived distribution of resources, or state withdrawal, is aligned with experiences of social cohesion and integration measures from the perspective of rural municipalities in Dalarna in Sweden. Many municipalities in peripheral and remote European regions face similar challenges following the decline of services and changing living conditions in Europe’s rural areas (European Commission 2004; Rodríguez-Pose 2018).

We base our exploration of the relationship between the provision of welfare and integration in rural areas on three observations. *Rural places are becoming actors* in global migration movements and the globalization of places instead of acting as passive recipients (Woods 2007; 2018, Hedberg and do Carmo 2012, Stenbacka 2013; 2018). The *presence of the welfare society is crucial* here. The Swedish model is built on a structure in which individuals (partly through tax) contribute to and can be supported by the welfare state when necessary. However, rural areas are characterized by limited access to essential services like grocery stores, pharmacies, libraries, and educational facilities and thereby an increasing loss of meeting places (Moberg 2019; Slåtmo et al. 2022). They therefore need to address their work with integration in circumstances of scarcity. From a policy view integration is equivalent to labour market participation. Political reforms have emphasized the migrant’s individual responsibilities for labour market establishment (the activation reform 2010; 2018), underscoring the importance of work for both the individual and society. However, access to work depends on other factors like lan-

guage skills and education, as well as support from the Swedish employment service or other actors. It is therefore interesting to examine the intersection of welfare and integration from a socio-spatial justice perspective that highlights rural realities. This chapter therefore focuses on education and labour market establishment.

Another aspect is *the prevailing societal discourse* claiming that spatial polarization between the city and the countryside is increasing (SOU 2017 193, 35). The search hits for polarization in the Swedish daily press more than quadrupled in the 2010s (Oscarsson et al. 2021). Sometimes such polarization tendencies, including dissatisfaction and support for political parties at the outer edges, are expected to be connected with service closures and reductions (Andersson 2020). However, the differences between Swedes living in big cities and in rural areas regarding the economy, education, health, social capital, left–right attitudes, and party sympathies have not grown but remained remarkably the same in most cases (Larsson, Hedberg and Holmberg 2020). Nor have researchers found any fertile ground for anti-establishment movements in the Swedish countryside (Erlingsson et al. 2021). The 2022 election meant a change in the political geography. The support for the right wing was stronger in rural areas than in metropolitan areas, and vice versa for the left wing. The advance of the Sweden Democrats (throughout the country except in Malmö municipality), was more accentuated outside the metropolitan areas, indicating a tendency towards polarization. However, it can also be noted that the differences between city and country are smaller than ever (Öhrvall 2022). Departing from these three observations, it seems relevant to investigate how international migration and integration intersect with welfare access issues.

CASE DESCRIPTION AND METHODS

Dalarna County, in western inland Sweden, includes two larger municipalities, Falun and Borlänge, with 38,000 and 52,000 inhabitants respectively. The other 13 municipalities consist of towns of between 5,000 and 12,000 inhabitants, and the county is classified as predominantly rural (Statistics Sweden 2022). Like many Swedish rural regions, Dalarna has undergone major economic restructuring, urbanization, and rural depopulation. It also faces an ageing population and the outmigration of young people, leading to a skills shortage and lower tax revenues. Immigration has been important for Dalarna to increase its population and replace young people of working age. An estimated 13 per cent of the total population in the region are foreign-born today, and of them more than 60 per cent have arrived during the last ten years. This leads to labour market integration challenges, including the validation of former education and work and upskilling to match migrants with the Swedish local labour market's demands. The foreign unemployment rate in Dalarna

is quite high – 38 per cent (compared to 26 per cent nationally), while it is approximately ten per cent among those born in Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2022). Adult education and language and labour market training are key to the region's integration work in accordance with the national political agenda. Matching the needs of the labour market and education is also important. The health and elderly sector especially needs more staff, and migrants are advised to educate themselves for such work.

Rural–urban relations within Dalarna and the region's participation in the globalizing of international migration and refugee settlement in relation to the general trends of neoliberalism, privatization, and welfare retrenchment make Dalarna an interesting case to illuminate ongoing processes in other similar Swedish and European rural regions. The material consists of 14 in-depth interviews with a total of 21 interviewees at national, regional, and local levels between October 2020 and March 2021. The interviewees included policy-makers, experts, stakeholders and public service providers, practitioners, and organizations working within migration-related (directly or indirectly) fields. By interviewing representatives from all levels, we gained an insight into how regional and national policymaking was perceived and implemented locally. We could also identify how different levels and sectors interacted and cooperated, including qualitative assessments. Our aim to illuminate stakeholders' and practitioners' experiences and explore mechanisms and connections between and across different governance levels motivated our methodological approach. We also conducted three focus group interviews with three to six participants. They focused on (a) the provision of services of general interest, (b) regional development and planning, and (c) Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and social enterprises. Some of the focus group participants were among the 21 interviewees.

To gain insights into refugee integration and welfare service trends and narratives, we also conducted a media analysis of the nine local newspapers in Dalarna: *Dalademokraten*; *Falukuriren*; *Borlänge Tidning*; *Nya Ludvika Tidning*; *Mora Tidning*; *Södra Dalarnas Tidning*; and *Avesta Tidning*. The material was gathered from the *Mediearkivet* (Retriever) database, Scandinavia's largest print and online media digital archive. We conducted two parallel searches, one with a focus on refugees and integration, one focusing on welfare and public service. The words used for the first search were 'integration', 'migration', 'migrant', 'immigrant', 'refugee', 'asylum', and 'unaccompanied minor'. The words for the second search were 'welfare', 'service', 'the public employment service', 'health centre', 'school', and 'care'. Both searches included the names of all Dalarna's municipalities. We thus got a hit on an article containing 'refugee' and 'Älvdalen', or 'school' and 'Borlänge'. The period between 1 July 2019 and 30 June 2020 was chosen to gather articles from both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as we

expected this to feature prominently in public health service media coverage. The welfare and service search generated 2,288 articles, and the integration search resulted in 116. However, as most of the articles were reprinted in all the newspapers, the actual number of articles was considerably smaller. We employed thematic analysis,¹ using insights from both studies to answer the question about the relationship between integration and welfare services in rural areas. While the interview study afforded an insight into experiences of integration measures in relation to cutbacks, the media analysis afforded insights into a broader trend of concerns about state retrenchment within different public sector areas.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND – SPATIAL JUSTICE FROM A RURAL PERSPECTIVE

Geographically uneven development is a fundamental aspect of the creation and maintenance of individual and social inequalities leading to social and spatial injustice (Soja 2010, 72). Nevertheless, scholars have examined spatial justice from a mainly urban scale, including social and material distribution and access to public space within the city (Lefebvre 1970; Mitchell 2003; Soja 2010). For Lefebvre (1970) justice was not merely about the right or access to something within the city; it was also about the right to participate in urban political transformation. This indicates the relationship between access to welfare services (including state withdrawal) and opportunities for participation and inclusion in society. As Eriksson and Tollefsen (2022) underscore, state retrenchments mostly affect the most vulnerable groups – children and young people, the unemployed, immigrants, and racialized groups – regardless of where they live. A theory of socio-spatial justice therefore needs to consider the relationality of space and that nationally generated policies with big city regions in mind may work out differently in rural regions with smaller populations than was intended.

Recently, the spatial justice framework has been identified as an approach that can highlight and address questions of rural inequality (Rauhut 2018; Jones et al. 2019; Carolan 2020; Eriksson and Tollefsen 2022). Both media and policy often portray rural regions as backwards and lagging in economic growth and regional competitiveness, existing only with the centre's support (Eriksson 2010; Jones et al. 2019). Neoliberal and market-oriented public service policies have led to a centralization of services in urban areas (Rauhut 2018; Kullberg et al. 2018). They have been shown to undermine existing resource allocation systems and hinder opportunities for innovative and cooperative solutions in rural areas (Kullberg et al. 2018). Researchers focusing on the Swedish northern periphery have also pointed out that regional policies and

the tax system's uneven structure systematically render the rural contribution to the national economy invisible (Eriksson and Tollefsen 2022, 221).

Nancy Fraser theorizes justice through a three-dimensional framework, including redistribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser et al. 2004). Redistribution focuses on economic structures and how people can be hindered in equal societal participation because of a maldistribution of resources (Fraser and Honneth 2003). We know rural municipalities' economy plays a significant role in their possibilities to offer adequate welfare services to their inhabitants compared to their urban counterparts. A Swedish study has also highlighted that today's equalization system (compensating for differences and creating equal economic conditions between the country's municipalities and regions) is partly built on outdated information and among other shortcomings fails to account for refugee settlement costs (SOU 2017, 161). Many rural municipalities therefore face increased expenses because of limited labour market participation and increased demand for support. While service digitalization can be a more resource-efficient solution, broadband access is also scarce in remote areas, and studies show an urban–rural divide in access to fixed broadband, especially access to Next Generation Broadband (Lundgren et al. 2020).

The second dimension – recognition – refers to culture and identity. Fraser argues that it is not enough to understand 'who gets what', but also who gets to decide what counts and 'what people need' (Fraser et al. 2004, 375). There is thus a relationship between economic distribution, class, and status in society. This fits well with a spatial analysis, particularly related to an urban norm that has been found to underpin social discourse and policy. The third dimension – representation – focuses on the political in decision making, and in our case whether the rural population experience local and national political parties and policies as representing them and their interests. The media is another arena that has proved important in contributing to people's interest in politics and the extent to which they perceive the political system as responsive and political participation as meaningful (Hansen and Pedersen 2014; Strömbäck and Shehata 2010). We next explore how the perceived distribution of resources – state withdrawal and decreased access to services – aligns with social cohesion from the perspective of Dalarna's rural municipalities.

PROVISION OF WELFARE AND INTEGRATION IN RURAL AREAS

Equal access to welfare services in Sweden has been seen as a precondition for people to successfully integrate, rather than a bonus for integrating (Borevi 2010). Refugees' social inclusion in Swedish society is to be achieved through the same measures as the general population, and targeted support for newly

arrived immigrants supplements this. Swedish municipalities are responsible for integration measures and refugees' welfare needs, overseeing language and civics courses, schooling, childcare, and elderly care. The state offers financial compensation during the first two years. If migrants are not self-sufficient after the two-year settlement period has ended, the municipalities are financially responsible for their subsistence. The Settlement Act was adopted in 2016 to improve the settlement of new arrivals on the labour market and in society. It obliges all Swedish municipalities to accept new arrivals for residence, meaning rural communities are highly involved in the mission to receive refugees and taking responsibility for their settlement.

Theoretically, refugees have the same access to welfare services like schooling and healthcare as the general population. However, they differ in their opportunities to use various services because of their socio-spatial positions. An interviewee maintained there was no lack of resources for good-quality services, but there were significant geographical differences in where these services were found: 'Good service is available but not necessarily in the often remote places where migrants live' (#006). Refugee households also lack the majority population's access to a car in rural areas.

A study for Sweden's largest civil service union, Fackförbundet ST, showed government service points in the country decreased by 37 per cent between 1997 and 2017. In Dalarna the decrease was even steeper, with a decrease of 45 per cent (Moberg 2019). According to a survey of the state's local presence by the Swedish Agency for Public Management, as many as 71 per cent responded that it was important that they could visit a physical office. This was particularly so for respondents living in rural areas, people with a lower level of education, and people with a migrant background (Statskontoret 2016).

Unsurprisingly, overall local media coverage focuses on two of Sweden's most prominent political debates, healthcare and education. In both areas the discussion concerns economy and localization. There is an ongoing debate about the privatization of healthcare services and whether tax receipts should go to private practices owned by risk capitalists (Södra Dalarnas Tidning 2019-08-23, Mora Tidning 2019-12-11, Falu-Kuriren 2019-11-26). Articles about schools and education focus either on expansion and investment, often in larger towns, or on closures in rural areas. Articles that specifically discuss integration overall have a positive outlook and highlight successful integration projects (Nya Ludvika Tidning 2019-10-30, Avesta Tidning 2020-03-18), migrants' participation in the labour market (Avesta Tidning 2020-04-27, Falu-Kuriren 2019-11-20), and financial compensation for municipalities that settle refugees (Falu-Kuriren 2019-09-20).

Labour Market Integration – A National Responsibility with Varied Local Outcomes

Redistribution focuses on economic structures and resource distribution. This is exemplified by public services related to labour market integration and education. Our informants recurrently return to the reduced presence of the Swedish Public Employment Service, the national authority responsible for individuals' opportunities to participate in the labour market and the settlement of new arrivals. Their main task is to contribute to a well-functioning labour market. Their mission includes the prevention of exclusion and increased employment for those hindered from joining the labour market. The Swedish Public Employment Services have undergone extensive reorganization; the two major changes are a transfer of responsibilities and a decrease of local representation. Before 2009 the municipalities were responsible for new arrivals. The Act on Establishment Initiatives for Certain Newly Arrived Immigrants (SFS 2010) transferred the responsibility and most of the resources to the Swedish Public Employment service. This shift is described as a little 'messy':

... the institutional memory is blurred. What was the purpose, the ambition of this reform? It was not really specified within the broader mission of the Swedish Public Employment service. But the mission was a little broader than their ordinary assignment. And the Swedish Public Employment Service is decreasing their local offices. They've lost the content of their mission a little. (#004)

The reorganization of the Swedish Public Employment Service (*Arbetsförmedlingen*, AF) meant that at the beginning of 2022 there were 88 offices with permanent staff, 24 offices to which staff travelled, and various kinds of cooperation in 103 municipalities offering personal meetings (Swedish Public Employment Service 2021). At the beginning of 2019 there were 238 offices with staff in 218 municipalities (Swedish Public Employment Service 2020). A disadvantage of decreased local presence is that '...knowledge about the local labour market, local business life, and local employers' risk is being lost' (#004). This knowledge is described as crucial for implementing intelligent and individual solutions, and its lack risks delaying labour market participation. Such close contact with different actors and the local labour market's character are described as important. As many migrants do not understand the complex immigration bureaucracy, how to navigate the system, and the help they can get, proximity to key institutions and personal guidance has been underscored as an important factor in successful integration.

We're trying to identify the success factors. It has a lot to do with being close to institutions and personnel that can offer guidance and coach them personally ini-

tially – which isn't really compatible with the distance service [i.e. digitalization of service] trend we're now seeing. (#004)

In a debate article published in March 2022 (*Svenska Dagbladet* 2022-03-31), 15 local politicians in Dalarna conclude that shutting local AF offices has entailed the disappearance of local knowledge about both jobseekers and the business community, the end of common work previously organized at the individual level, and the people farthest from the labour market being most affected. Politicians call for clearer control of AF regarding municipalities' role and opportunities in collaboration with the jobseekers most distant from the labour market. It is also emphasized that there is a risk that increased digitalization will make contact more difficult for certain groups.

A survey of the Swedish Public Employment Service's assignments shows a negative overall image: 72 per cent of municipalities state that the authorities' physical presence is inappropriate for supporting jobseekers. Furthermore, 95 per cent of municipalities provide one or more forms of support to jobseekers who are part of the Swedish Public Employment Service's responsibility; municipal employees step in and provide support to the unemployed (for example, enrolment at the Swedish Public Employment Service, activity reporting, interpreting decisions, and coordination of settlement initiatives for new arrivals). The survey raises questions about how the authorities can continue to work to ensure quality and equivalence while responding to jobseekers' and employers' needs across the country, as 42 per cent of municipalities report that they lack a constructive dialogue with the employment service about how to ensure a local presence (SKR 2021, 6).

Even in the media analysis the rollback of the Public Employment Service is evidently a potent issue in Dalarna. It concerns how to reduce the region's unemployment figures. In one debate article Anders Knape, the Chairman of Sweden's Municipalities and County Councils (SKR), states: 'Clear signals show that those farthest from the labour market do not receive enough support to gain employment. This is reinforced by the ongoing and rapid reorganization of the Swedish Public Employment Service' (*Nya Ludvika Tidning* 2019-09-18).

Another media theme is that by shutting offices the state reduces its presence in Dalarna's rural municipalities, while the Swedish Public Employment Service hires new employees for a new national office in the region's capital, Falun. The national organization's mandate is the detection and prevention of social security fraud, and it is not a public service (*Falu-Kuriren* 2019-09-23). The media also focuses on the lack of connection between the government and the execution of the Swedish Public Employment Service's reorganization. One article is entitled 'Next to provocative' (*Dalademokraten* 2019-11-29), referring to a ministerial statement about the importance of local presence

when offices are already closed; the closure of several offices took place quickly, but it is stated that the government emphasizes the importance of a local presence. A parallel message is that decisions crucial for the development of smaller communities are made quickly and with insufficient anchoring in either the government or local communities.

These contemporary circumstances show that municipalities have extensive responsibilities for their citizens, and in certain areas they also cover for the state, as our interviews also express: '... they see that if we don't do this, these people ... will need livelihood support, so we must act. There's no clear division of responsibility' (#009). We therefore discern a dissatisfaction with the distribution of responsibilities, a lack of a national strategy for the local level, an agreement concerning what the goal should be, and a lack of communication between different sectors and levels.

Fraser's first dimension, redistribution, focuses on economic structures and how the maldistribution of resources prevents people participating on equal terms in society (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Rural municipalities experience the shrinking number of offices as negative because fewer resources are placed in rural areas, while municipalities face the issues the offices were supposed to address. The economy of rural municipalities plays a significant role in their opportunity to offer adequate welfare services to their inhabitants, and this may be negatively affected if the reduced presence of the state authority means municipalities need to increase their commitment without compensation.

Consequences of Inflow and Outflow – State Compensation and Local Efforts

In this section we focus on the structures needed to secure stable refugee settlement. Besides catering to immediate needs such as housing and food, areas related to education, care, and administration need to be strengthened, both with monetary resources and staff, as the population grows and includes new groups. Our interviewees frequently refer to the period between 2015 and 2016, when there was a large influx of refugees. Rural communities were faced with the major responsibility of catering to the newly arrived refugees. They describe this as a tough situation but one in which municipalities and civil society rose to the occasion and cooperated in the provision of basic services, larger school spaces, teachers, and volunteers to distribute clothes and provide social activities. The interviews indicate the influx of refugees during this period was generally welcomed, and many private individuals wished to volunteer alongside the civil society sector. However, the pressure on social services and the education system was great, particularly for some of our case municipalities, which received a relatively large number of unaccompanied refugee minors.

While adult asylum seekers are the responsibility of the Swedish Migration Agency, the municipalities' social services are responsible for unaccompanied minors. A representative from one of the case municipalities describes how the social services almost broke down, and that many employees resigned because of the workload. 'It was a little too tough for a municipality as small as ours. ... So many arrived. The state should have governed the distribution better' (#015).

An informant representing a national authority maintains institutions at different levels may have various incentives. For example, the National Migration Agency needs housing and a certain number of beds, while a local municipality considers other sectors and contexts. A factor mentioned is that the arrival of migrants has surprised some municipalities, resulting in tension.

... if there was a better dialogue between the state and the municipality, you wouldn't end up in these conflicts. This is the basis of the population's polarization and problems. The ordinary resident may blame municipal councils for putting the municipality in this situation, but it's just as much a surprise to them. (#004)

Another important aspect is that since 2015/16 the number of people granted a residence permit for protection has continuously decreased, and municipalities have therefore received fewer new arrivals. Fewer arrivals can be challenging for small municipalities: it requires the downsizing of established services while maintaining the capacity to cater to different migrant groups' various needs. Some of our informants involved in the reception of unaccompanied minors at the peak of the refugee crisis were now worried that the knowledge and expertise they had built in the organization would diminish, and that it would be difficult to rebuild the capacity should the number of asylum seekers again increase (#008; #011). Yet municipalities still took care of the unaccompanied minors arriving in 2015/16. A change in the reimbursement system for unaccompanied minors in 2017 (SFS 2017) is described as changing the prerequisites for working with this group.

In one municipality the integration coordinator explains that they had had a well-established organization for taking care of unaccompanied minors. The reimbursement per individual has now been reduced,² and they are unable to sustain the high level of support they want:

At first, we got SEK 1,900 per individual per day until they turned 21. That made it possible to have full-time personnel working with the minors. They could work both with practical knowledge ... and regarding different cultures, and we could give them the right guidance. ... We could be with them all the time, in different situations. And when we 'let them go' when they turned 21, they'd come such a long way! If we look at how it went for ten of the first (unaccompanied minors) we welcomed [in the municipality], all are self-sufficient today. But that's a record we've been unable to maintain: we're unable to work with them to the same extent. (#008)

This agrees with findings from previous research regarding unaccompanied minors, which has shown that Swedish municipalities often struggle to maintain a high quality of social services for them, and that they generally have very little adult contact (Lundberg and Dahlquist 2012; Seidel and James 2019). A recent challenge is the closing down of housing for asylum seekers. In 2015 it was difficult to find enough housing quickly. With declining asylum seeker numbers the reverse is the case. Municipalities want the migration agency to keep housing in place, as it helps avert population decline and provides work opportunities for the rural population (#005). Another issue is municipalities' opportunities to plan regarding the school economy, for example. Municipalities are financially compensated for the education of each asylum-seeking child. For small rural schools, losing students also means less money to keep their full teaching staff, which may have consequences for the quality of teaching for the children who stay.

The media's school debate focuses on large deficits, centralization, and rural school closures. New schools are being built in urban areas; it is suggested rural schools should be closed. In an article entitled 'Keep the village schools' (Dala-Demokraten 2020-05-30) it is suggested that the state should assume responsibility for schools so that it is not the responsibility of municipal budgets to provide good schools for their inhabitants. The principle that the school should be equal for all regardless of background or where you live is key for principals and teachers, who worry that forced cutbacks make it difficult to meet the requirements of the Swedish education law (Dala-Demokraten 2020-05-30, Borlänge Tidning 2020-05-30).

Fraser's second dimension – recognition – refers to culture and identity, what counts, and 'what people need' (Fraser et al. 2004, 375). This section has illuminated the rural experience of 'being there for the needs of the state' rather than being recognized on merit and where the needs and opportunities of the local context are considered. The interviewees voice their experiences of a state policy which, intentionally or not, has assumed that rural areas and places constitute a resource in meeting sudden national needs, and that the same areas lose this status when needs change. From the rural perspective local needs are not accounted for. The structure around the reception of refugees was developed primarily from a national perspective, and there was too much focus on where to find available housing and the principle that every municipality should share the responsibility. However, experience reveals specific local circumstances and needs are not accounted for, either during or after settlement. Education and school policy are areas where local needs do not correspond to what is provided.

Remote Decision Making and Lack of Representation

The third dimension in Fraser's framework (Fraser and Honneth 2003) addresses representation in relation to political and decision-making processes. In our case this is related to whether the rural population experience local and national political parties and policies as representing them and their interests. Such issues are connected with communication: the anchoring of decisions, distribution of responsibilities, and discussions of consequences. We focus on views of state interventions and experiences of state withdrawal and expectations of municipalities. A recent study exploring regional differences shows how residents in rural places are more concerned about other residents' behaviour or living conditions, while residents outside urban areas are more concerned about the negative consequences of public institutions' decisions, such as closures or reduced access to public service (Erlingsson et al. 2021, 51).

One informant from a national authority says that Sweden is a country with a generally positive attitude towards migrants, and that this is also the case in specific localities. If tensions arise, he says, it is probably because the concentration of migrants in some places is disproportionate to the majority population, which he connects with competition for basic services: 'suddenly, the municipality's population finds all dental appointments are booked for one year ahead' (#006). In addition to the withdrawal of public funds and reorganization there may be recruitment difficulties.

Both local and national interviewees reflect on the lack of services and wonder if it might lead people to draw simple conclusions that scapegoat migrants.

In several remote villages they shut the healthcare centre and opened asylum health centres. To implement such policies without a dialogue with citizens is like placing a spanner in the works. Sadly, it leads to everyday racism and polarization. (#010)

Interviewees from civil society especially discuss young adults from the majority population, whom they describe as outside society because they lack education and work opportunities. A civil society representative working with local youth projects in several rural areas in Dalarna explains that young people are particularly vulnerable when rural schools close, and this may lead to some young people feeling neglected. A recent study by the Swedish agency for youth and civil society (Saarinen 2019) revealed that more than 50 per cent of rural young people felt excluded or that they were not actively participating in society, connecting this with access to education and public transport. Some of our interviewees working with young people say they fear some local young

people may become an easy target for extreme right-wing groups, which they see as offering easy explanations for rural problems.

These young adults feel they have no place in society, but [in their view] a place is given in society to migrants, and they get money through public subsidies so they can get by. But this group is totally criminalized and pushed away. (#008)

Besides these concerns we see no increased explicit polarization tendencies in the interviews or in the local media, which corresponds to previous findings (Larsson, Hedberg and Holmberg 2020). However, we see a concern for polarization among informants, and that the prevailing conditions in rural areas sometimes prevent migrants' social and economic inclusion. This dimension is linked with the first, redistribution. Tension and dissatisfaction with the perception of rural municipalities and how resources are distributed also affect experiences of representation and participation. Departing from Fraser's third dimension – representation – we find certain local conditions indicate a lack of representation.

We find no significantly outspoken negative connection between scarce resources or poorer access to public services and refugee settlement. However, some voices make this connection. In one article about school closures a representative of the Sweden Democrats accuses the Social Democrats and the left-wing party in Avesta of wanting to settle too many migrants, claiming this causes a difficult economic situation and the closure of rural schools (Avesta Tidning 2020-04-17). Another article discusses a change in the so-called EBO Law, which prevents asylum seekers choosing where to live. According to a representative of the Social Democrats in Borlänge municipality the law will contribute to preventing segregation and provide the municipality with better opportunities to offer good schools and healthcare if the number of asylum seekers decreases (Borlänge Tidning 2019-11-25).

CONCLUSION

Fraser's theoretical framework reveals processes that affect the opportunities and experiences of local life. Experiences signal that redistribution, or access to resources, does not respond to the areas of responsibility following the reception and settlement of refugees. Rural areas' needs are not recognized, and policy has largely departed from the state's needs. We can also discern a quest for increased representation. Two aspects concern experiences of being neglected, both among young individuals and local politicians. We should add that media representation of certain groups – young people or international migrants – is scarce. If they are visible, it is rarely as citizens with recognized perspectives and opinions.

Integration may be experienced in many ways (Laine 2022), but as economic, social, cultural, and political participation concerns people and their immediate local context, close and reachable institutions and arenas are crucial. It is important to distinguish between access to physical services and services in general. A decrease in physical access is often motivated by increased digital access, but this does not always correspond to existing needs. Work is considered key to integration, and it also permeates integration policies. Migrants are also key to meeting existing and local labour needs, yet the role of a contributing societal actor requires local structures and welfare functions. Examples are access to basic education and the Swedish Public Employment Service within a reasonable distance.

We have shown integration policy implementation depends on other welfare structures' presence. Although our study's practitioners highlight this, local media does not present it for public discussion. Integration policy needs to be mainstreamed with policies for developing and managing welfare. This study increases knowledge of regional cohesion and adds to knowledge of the role municipalities play in fulfilling international and national political and humanitarian goals. It also contributes to a nuanced discussion of how rural conditions can be linked with polarization, or a concern for polarization. Instead of distrust of the state, more state intervention is desired, as the state is seen as the proper actor in ensuring social justice is spatially distributed. The struggle for rural justice involves both migrants and locals alike (Laine 2022; Tollefsen and Eriksson 2022). Our interviewees reveal a fear that the opportunities for integrating refugees well both socially and economically are slipping through their fingers.

NOTES

1. We first read through the whole material to gain an overview. In the next step we divided the articles from the integration search into four categories and the welfare and service articles into six categories. We then chose to focus on the categories most relevant to our purpose. These categories were 1: school structure and closure; 2: the public employment service and service centres; 3: public/private healthcare services; and 4: reduced service/satisfaction with service. The two largest categories were COVID-related articles and 'other', which were extracted from the analysis.
2. Since 2017 the general reimbursement per individual has been SEK 1,350 per day until the age of 18 (SFS 2017).

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