

# Personal, peaceful, progressive: Integration workers' narratives of refugee settlement and the rural

Turid Sætermo PhD<sup>1</sup>  | Guro Korsnes Kristensen PhD<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Diversity and Inclusion, NTNU Social Research, Trondheim, Norway

<sup>2</sup>Department of Interdisciplinary Studies of Culture, NTNU, Trondheim, Norway

## Correspondence

Turid Sætermo, Department of Diversity and Inclusion, NTNU Social Research, Dragvoll Allé 38B, 7049 Trondheim, Norway.

Email: [turid.satermo@ntnu.no](mailto:turid.satermo@ntnu.no)

## Funding information

Norges Forskningsråd, Grant/Award Number: 261982

## Abstract

Settlement of refugees in rural areas in Norway is part of a national strategy to counter depopulation and thus links to ideas of revitalization and more promising futures for these areas. It also links up to an idea of smaller communities as 'better at integrating', as smaller communities both enable and necessitate more contact between the original population and newcomers. However, although some municipalities reap advantages of the dispersed settlement policy and succeed in retaining settled refugees, other municipalities 'fail'. This article explores how the integration of refugees in rural communities is interpreted by public integration workers in two rural-coastal municipalities where the outcomes differ significantly. Drawing on 15 qualitative interviews, we discuss how integration workers make sense of local integration efforts, and how notions of the rural are (re)produced through their integration narratives. The analysis finds that the integration narratives draw on and reproduce both distinct and overlapping imaginaries of rural areas. We identify two main imaginaries: the rural as future-oriented and dynamic, and the rural as close-knit and peaceful.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2023 The Authors. *Sociologia Ruralis* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of European Society for Rural Sociology.

**KEYWORDS**

integration, integration work, narrative, refugee settlement, rural-ity

**INTRODUCTION**

Like many rural regions in Europe, rural regions in Norway are faced with the challenge of depopulation and ageing due to the departure of young people (Bråtå, 2020; NOU, 2020:15; Sampedro & Camarero, 2020). Many municipalities have adopted strategies to attract new inhabitants, including the provision of grants for house purchases, support for entrepreneurship and infrastructure upgrade (Aure et al., 2018; Lønning & Teigen, 2009; Munkejord, 2016). They are also supported by national district policies, which have an overall ambition of securing a population base in all parts of the country (Haugen & Lysgård, 2006; NOU, 2020), the importance of which has recently been actualized in the context of strained relations with Russia. In recent years, refugee settlement has increasingly been embraced as a strategy to increase and rejuvenate the population in rural areas (Aure et al., 2018; Rye, 2018; Søholt et al., 2018; Steen & Røed, 2018). National authorities have since the 1990s carried out a policy of dispersed refugee settlement, which was formalized in 2002 (Hernes, 2017). The aim of this settlement programme is to reduce the concentration of refugees in the bigger cities, while at the same time bringing much-needed 'demographic refill' to rural areas (Djuve & Kavli, 2000; Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014; Søholt et al., 2018:129; Tønnesen & Andersen, 2019). Furthermore, an idea that integration is faster and easier in the countryside also underpins the policy, which is portrayed as a strategy to 'accelerate integration' (Valenta & Bunar, 2010) and dissuade ethnic segregation.

Local autonomy holds a particularly strong position in Norway, also with regards to refugee settlement (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2010), and the central government's policy depends on local governments' willingness to settle refugees. The main tool in this respect is the economic incentives that municipalities receive for 5 years following settlement, which for certain municipalities can make a substantial difference in their budgets. Yet most importantly, refugees represent much-needed immigration that contributes to ensuring a demographic basis for schools, leisure activities, services, shops and so on. Many rural municipalities – including those with little experience with refugee settlement – have therefore settled quite large numbers of refugees in recent years (Kristensen & Sætermo, 2021; Søholt & Aasland, 2021; Tønnesen & Andersen, 2019), and many express both a capacity and a will to settle more refugees (Kristensen & Gullikstad, 2022).

For refugee settlement as a demographic strategy to work, successful integration is crucial, in the sense that refugees should want to become part of and stay on in the municipality. However, rural municipalities succeed very differently in retaining settled refugees, which it is fair to assume influence how the invested efforts are interpreted locally. This, we believe, also interacts with ideas and notions about qualities of rural municipalities as places to live.

It is well known in research on the depopulation and repopulation of rural areas that many rural municipalities draw on understandings and ideas that can be described as the 'good life in the countryside' to attract and retain newcomers and counter out-migration (Anthopoulou et al., 2017). The idyllic aspects of rural lives, with less stress, tranquillity, access to nature, lower living costs and so on, are examples of qualities that are used to describe rural areas as places to live, and as different from urban areas. This representation of the rural also figures in policy documents,

including the latest Norwegian White Paper on district policies (Meld.St.27) (2022–2023), which states that ‘closeness to nature, experiences, and tight-knit local communities make district areas attractive and unique’ (p. 1). However, in Norway as elsewhere, a different image of the rural is also sometimes engaged, presenting rural communities as dynamic, progressive and future-oriented, thus holding opportunities and promising vitality. Such understandings of rural communities go against common notions of the rural as backward and stagnant and see them as more closely connected with progressive and diverse urban societies (McAreevey & Argent, 2018). Moreover, studies have shown that successful experiences with integration are used as arguments for future settlement policies in rural regions and municipalities, as well as to attract newcomers (Gullikstad & Kristensen, 2021; Kristensen & Gullikstad, 2022; Kristensen & Sætermo, 2021).

In Norway, integration work is largely a public responsibility (Espegren et al., 2019), which in practical terms is handled on the local municipal level, through publicly funded integration services (Sætermo et al., 2021). Municipal integration services therefore play a key role both with regards to the municipality’s achievement of national integration policy goals and the municipalities’ own ambitions of retaining new inhabitants in the local community. The employees of these services can be described as the front-line workers of local integration, and their perspectives therefore provide a gateway to insights into ideas of integration in rural municipalities and ideas of place qualities and place identity. The aim of this article is to explore how notions of the rural and refugee integration are articulated and (re)produced in the narratives of municipal integration workers. The article employs the concept of integration in an exploratory way and is concerned with how the informants give meaning and content to the concept when they talk about the municipality’s experiences with refugee settlement. Drawing on 15 qualitative interviews, the article asks: How do integration workers in rural municipalities present local efforts at integrating settled refugees? Which understandings of rurality and integration are produced in these narratives?

The article starts by providing an outline of policies and research on refugee settlement in rural areas with a particular focus on Norway and discusses the relevance of the Norwegian case for the broader research field. Thereafter, we present the article’s theoretical framework and methodological approach, before proceeding to analyse the interviews. In the article’s final section, we discuss representations of rurality and integration that we identify in the interviews, arguing that two overarching imaginaries of the rural community as context for integration emerge: the rural as future-oriented and dynamic, and the rural as close-knit and peaceful.

## **REFUGEE SETTLEMENT AND RURAL AREAS AS ‘GOOD PLACES TO LIVE’**

The article takes as its starting point that although refugee settlement in rural areas also reflects these municipalities’ desires to help people in need, it takes on an added importance as demographic strategy to mitigate depopulation. In Norway, as in many other countries, the situation of depopulation of rural areas is very relevant (Aasbrenn & Sørli, 2016), even though Norwegian regional policy for a very long time has had an overall aim of counteracting centralization (Haugen & Lysgård, 2006). Regional policies contain, for example, strategies to provide access to basic services to all citizens, irrespective of where they live, and strategies to strengthen industry and trade in rural regions. They also emphasize the importance of population composition for the possibility of growth and development. This ties into the policies regulating the settlement of refugees and asylum-seekers, where dispersed settlement has been a governing premise since

the 1990s (Søholt et al., 2018). The way these policies work, refugees themselves do not choose where to settle, rather, municipalities are asked by national authorities to accept a certain number of refugees for settlement, whom will be decided by the state. Compared to other Scandinavian countries, Norway has the most dispersed refugee settlement, with 25% of refugees initially settled in rural areas (Hernes et al., 2019). Today, immigrants (settled refugees and labour migrants) are represented in all Norwegian municipalities, and some small municipalities that have experienced depopulation for decades are experiencing population growth, as well as economic growth, due to migration (Aure et al., 2018; Rye, 2018). Dispersed refugee settlement is also increasing in other European countries (Patuzzi et al., 2020), and discussions around challenges and opportunities related to refugee integration in rural communities are unfolding many places. Common concerns are, for example, that the tight-knit and/or homogenous social fabric of rural communities can make it more difficult for refugees to build social ties, and that it can be harder for smaller communities to provide tailored integration services (Patuzzi et al., 2020). On the other hand, the smaller size of services in rural communities can also mean a higher degree of informality, faster exchange of information, greater flexibility and more personalized support (ibid).

In general, more immigrants have settled in rural areas in the Nordic region – and in Norway in particular – compared to other European countries in recent years (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2023; Proietti & Veneri, 2021; Schech, 2014; Søholt et al., 2014; Tronstad & Joonas, 2013). This makes the Norwegian example a particularly interesting case for studying rural integration. Though numbers include labour migrants, Søholt and Aasland (2021) found that refugees are more likely than before to remain in the rural areas where they have been settled, rather than move to urban areas (Søholt & Aasland, 2021). Hof et al. (2021) suggested that although settling in a place is a one-time happening, staying should be understood as an ongoing practice. Following from this, they also call for a stronger recognition of the importance of place in the shaping of staying (ibid). For refugees as for others who settle in rural municipalities, various factors beyond the ‘warmth of the welcome’ contribute to shape attachment and desires to stay. It is a matter of concrete advantages, such as employment, possibilities of realizing home ownership dreams, access to appropriate services and leisure activities. But it is also related to experiencing the place as a good place to live. For example, Søholt et al. (2012) found that the experience of social esteem and of ‘being seen’ was an important factor for immigrants who choose to remain in small, rural communities, and something they reported that they did not expect to find in larger, urban settings (see also Sætermo, Gjertsen Penner & Kristensen, forthcoming). Some also underlined qualities, such as safety, quietness and beautiful nature (Søholt et al., 2012) and certain lifestyle opportunities (Lynnebakke, 2021). In line with this, Kristensen and Gullikstad (2022) found in interviews with 13 mayors in a sparsely populated region in Norway, that international migration is seen as positively contributing to demography and local industry, and as enriching for the local community. In this respect, recent demographic changes have contributed to foster new place identities as ‘diverse communities’, as opposed to rural societies being often depicted as homogenous, traditional and closed-minded (Kristensen & Gullikstad, 2022).

Yet, there are also barriers to inclusion for refugees settling in rural communities, such as, for example, a lack of meeting places, which makes it difficult to get to know locals, or poor public transport, which can complicate participation in social life and activities. Moreover, possibilities for inclusion can also be positively or negatively affected by gender, age, health and so on, depending on the municipalities’ population composition, services and needs. For example, parents with small children often have access to more arenas for meeting locals and a broader motivation for engaging with the local community where their children grow up (Haaland et al., 2021). Work opportunities tend to outweigh other barriers, and studies have underlined the importance of

opportunities in local labour markets for refugees' likelihood of staying in rural areas in longer term perspectives (Fang et al., 2018). Employment and economic self-sufficiency are also the overarching goals in national integration policies, against which local integration work is measured and monitored. This means that the pressure to find work is also imposed externally. However, labour markets in rural municipalities often have limited opportunities (Norges Offentlige Utdrening, 2011), and for many municipalities, the officially set performance targets related to the labour market integration of refugees are far beyond reach. Moreover, the push towards employment can contribute to driving secondary moving from rural areas to larger cities. There is thus a potential conflict between rural municipalities' long-term projects of reversing population decline and sustaining settlement, and national authorities' goal of speeding up refugees' labour market attachment. Yet, as a result of this, the responsibility for secondary moving can be located with national authorities, and hence, outside of municipal competence – so that local understandings of 'good integration work' can be upheld. Notions of the quality of local integration work and of the rural as 'a good place to live' can therefore prevail despite varying results when it comes to retaining the settled refugees.

The context described so far links up to an important theme in the effort at revitalizing rural areas, namely the ways that rural areas are perceived and represented. In research literature, scholars have argued that rather than seeking to define the rural, the central question regards how rurality is socially constructed (Rye, 2006). Studies have shown that 'the rural' is understood as meaningfully different from the urban in manifold ways (Soares da Silva et al., 2016), for example as 'authentic' and 'idyllic' (Halfacree, 1993). Following rural transformations, especially related to a reduced importance of the agricultural sector and an increased importance of tourism, many rural areas have taken on new (and marketized) identities such as 'nature destination' and 'food destination'. Herslund and Paulgaard (2021) wrote that ideas of rural areas as good places to live and grow up are deeply seated in Norwegian social imaginaries. Positive notions of the rural are also important – and actively used – to attract new permanent inhabitants, who should be convinced by the idea of the countryside as a good place to live, as family-friendly, healthy, as holding opportunities and so on. These notions also need to tap into collective imaginings of the place by those who already live there in order to be sustained. Many researchers of the rural have employed the concept of *imaginaries* to capture the socially constructed, taken-for-granted, collectively shared assumptions about rural reality (Arruda, 2015; Stokowski et al., 2021); that is, as processes through which people make sense of and negotiate meanings about a place. Importantly, imaginaries are understood as 'flexible claims' (Stokowski et al., 2021) that are reproduced through social and cultural practices, including stories. One aim of this article is to show empirically how this can play out in integration narratives, and to compare narratives anchored in two rural municipalities that differ significantly with regards to demographics, economic activity and industries, geography and historical experiences, as well as with regards to experiences when it comes to refugee settlement and integration.

## INTEGRATION AS A LOCAL PHENOMENON

In the article, we approach integration as a local phenomenon, shaped by local conditions and having local consequences. As noted, we do not adopt a specific definition of integration but explore what the concept is taken to mean by our informants. Through this approach, we wish to go beyond the commonly used national lens and rather focus on integration as policies and practices unfolding in concrete situations and actual local settings. Our approach also links our work to

a scholarship often referred to as the *local turn* within integration research, which places local context and local integration strategies and policies at its centre (Hadj Abdou, 2019; Meissner & Tilmann, 2020). Much of the research within this field has concerned itself with the increasing importance of local integration policies vis-à-vis the national (Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017), often studying how policies at the different levels converge, contrast or conflict (Jørgensen, 2012; Scholten, 2013). One claim is that national policies – often focusing on *limiting* immigration – tend to diverge from local policies of rural areas, as the latter typically seek to *attract* immigrants to counter population decline and secure local services. Local integration policies are therefore often assumed to be more inclusive and community-oriented than those at the national level (Hadj Abdou, 2019; Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2018).

It is also argued that local policies tend to take on a more pragmatic and solution-oriented approach to immigrants and to accommodating ethnic diversity (Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Jørgensen, 2012; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). In line with this, Careja (2019) argued that, from a local point of view, integration tends to be seen as tied in with local development, and that immigrants are seen as potential resources. Such approaches suggest that local policies in fact have a bigger impact on integration processes than national policies, not least because they are more closely connected to the immigrants and can respond more concretely and immediately to their needs (Caponio & Borkert, 2010). However, as Emilsson (2015) pointed out, power relations between national and local policies are not even. Though integration researchers have become more attentive to the significance of local processes, it is still the case that municipalities are not free to overwrite national policy. National authorities still decide on integration goals and measures to be implemented, often leaving local authorities with restricted room to manoeuvre (Emilsson, 2015).

Bearing in mind the multidimensional take on integration that many rural and smaller communities must adopt, this article examines narratives of municipal integration workers, as front-line ‘executive actors’ of local integration work, working at the intersection between national integration policies and local concerns and realities. Our point of departure is that although their work is situated in and shaped by the local rural context, it is still monitored by national authorities and must seek to comply with nationally set targets. Against this backdrop, we explore the role that notions of the rural play in their narratives, and how the narratives contribute to reproduce such notions, in particular in relation to imaginaries of the rural as a ‘good place to live’.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article draws on in-depth interviews with integration workers in two rural municipalities that we have called Fjord and Bay. The interviews are part of a broader data collection in a project that explored how ‘integration’ is understood by a range of actors in several small local communities, including settled refugees. In this article, however, the focus will be on the integration workers’ narratives and their meaning-making processes regarding integration policies and integration work. The term ‘integration worker’ will be used to refer to employees in local public services that in various ways assist refugees in settling in in the community, such as refugee services, social services and adult education centres.

In the 2 selected municipalities, we interviewed a total of 15 employees in different positions within these services. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 min. Most were individual interviews; one was conducted as a group interview. We then analysed the interview transcripts focusing on how the informants address and narrate immigrant integration in the community, the

work they themselves perform, local rural realities and national integration policies. We found narrative analysis to be a useful method in this work and base our conception of narratives on the idea that they link individuals' lives and experiences with broader discourses or collective narratives, including those about communities, identities and belonging (Elliott, 2005; Somers, 1994). Although narratives have individual forms, they are also collective processes that are both shaped by the context they are created in and contribute to shaping it (Elliot, 2005; Phoenix, 2007). This means that all conversations can be described as a co-production of stories and that 'smaller' stories that are produced individually are part of 'big' stories that societies and cultures share (Bo et al., 2016). Narratives thus draw on shared and symbolic notions, such as the rural imaginaries we described earlier. At the same time, narratives not only use but also *enact* and *reproduce* collective ideas and meanings. Therefore, narrative analysis provides a fruitful gateway for exploring the complex processes involved when meaning is created and communicated.

## **SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN TWO RURAL COMMUNITIES: FJORD AND BAY**

'Fjord' and 'Bay' can both be described as typical rural Norwegian municipalities with small and geographically dispersed populations, each having about 5–6000 inhabitants over approximately 1000 km<sup>2</sup>. Due to their decentralized locations, they both face the risk of depopulation (Aasbrenn & Sørli, 2016); therefore, over the last 10 years, the municipal councils in both Fjord and Bay have made the decision to settle refugees nearly every year.

The local situations of the two municipalities, including material and economic contexts, local norms, and everyday life practices, have provided an important frame for the analysis. Fjord was chosen as a case for our study due to the municipality's reputation for success, or as a 'best practice municipality', when it comes to immigrant integration. In the period between 2010 – when Fjord settled the first refugees – and 2018, 290 refugees have been settled, of which more than 75% were still living in Fjord when our study started. In local and regional newspapers, Fjord has been described as exemplary in its integration work, and representatives from the local integration service have been invited to national integration events to share their positive experiences and inspire other municipalities in their integration work. Fjord has an extensive industry related to fish farming and farming, which has created many new companies and employment opportunities as well as expectations of continued growth in activity and population size. The municipality has no large towns within commuting distance, so the establishment of local companies is essential to prevent inhabitants from relocating for work.

Bay, on the other hand, was included in our research because of a rather different outcome, namely that most of the refugees who had been settled there over the last decade have moved elsewhere. Bay first welcomed immigrants in 2010, and by 2018, they had settled approximately 200 people, of whom as many as 80% had moved to other places (Statistics Norway [SSB], 2017). Nevertheless, the municipality has continued to settle new refugees every year. The local labour market has for decades experienced significant fluctuations, and the unemployment rates have in periods been among the highest in the region. In addition to agriculture, a mechanical workshop has been the municipality's primary employer in the private sector; however, the workshop has had phases of economic difficulties and has periodically been closed down. An overall question in the local politics has been how recession can be turned into growth, both in terms of employment opportunities and the population size. In this regard, Bay could be described as in a transitional phase.

## FJORD: A NARRATIVE OF THE PROACTIVE AND FORWARD-LEANING MODERN MUNICIPALITY

As we had expected, the main message conveyed about integration in the interviews with the front-line integration workers in Fjord was that of success, optimism and pride. These positive feelings were to some extent related to high scores on measurable parameters regarding labour market participation, but they were also narrated as related to political priorities, local working culture and hiring practices as well as the local integration service's stated philosophy and strategies.

A clear spokesperson for this success-narrative was the leader of the local integration service. As the person responsible for developing the integration service from the very beginning, when the first refugees came to Fjord, he had extensive knowledge of all aspects of the services they provided and an impressive overview of the local community, including the many refugees that had been settled over the years. Moreover, he had strong ideas and opinions about the future of the municipality and the ways in which refugee settlement could contribute to this future. More specifically, the leader supported a political ambition for reversing the population decline by attracting more people into the growing industries, and as we will see, both settlement and employment were intrinsic to his positive narrative on the exceptional achievements of the municipality's integration work. He attributed the success to the fact that a relatively high proportion of the settled refugees had managed to get a paid job and remained in the municipality after having completed the mandatory introduction programme:

I remember when I started in this position in 2010, the statistics of rural settlement were entirely different [than it is now]. Back then, you could estimate that only 30–40% of the refugees remained living in the municipality they were settled in after the first five years if it was a rural municipality. But the situation in Fjord is different, very much because of the growing industry and the open-minded and inclusive attitudes of the local employees.

This notion of successful integration was also expressed by several of the leader's colleagues at the local integration office, both when they were commenting on the municipality's efforts to integrate the refugees who were settled there or, just as often, when referring to specific refugees who had become what they described as 'integrated'. A 'success story' that emerged in several of the interviews was about a specific refugee who, only a few years after settlement, managed to get a permanent position as a specialist in a local IT company as well as acquired a driving licence and bought a house of his own. Another story, which was also presented by several integration workers in the interviews or in other settings where we participated, described a man who, in less than 2 years, was taken in as an apprentice in a local construction company. A third story frequently shared was that of a single mother who, while supporting her eight children in their various sports activities, also had managed to be a volunteer in the local sports club and secure permanent employment with a local business. This way of talking about integration may be interpreted as a response to national policies, where employment is narrated both as a goal in itself and as a means to reach other goals – such as being able to speak the language at a level sufficient for taking part in everyday life and nurturing a sense of belonging in the local community.

Although the overall integration narrative about Fjord as it is presented by the integration workers focused a lot on individual refugees qualifying for further education and employment, it



was also a story about the local integration services and the ways in which they have interpreted the national integration policies, aims and measures. An example of this local contextuality can be found in the leader's narrative about the ways in which the integration service in Fjord was approaching newly settled refugees:

Our first meeting with the people who come here as refugees has a really positive atmosphere. We show a lot of curiosity [about] who they are, and not to mention what they bring with them in terms of work experience and education. We are interested in who they are as individuals, basically. We acknowledge that they have resources that we in one way or another have to discover how to make use of. And that's of course the first question we ask them when they arrive. It's become a sort of mantra for me: 'What have you done, and what do you want to do?'. And this sparks some kind of energy in that person that can be very valuable [for the refugee's future situation in the municipality].

In this quote, we see how the integration work is centred around an idea that the refugees are fundamentally capable people who, with guidance, should be able to establish a new life in their new place of residence, where they will not be a burden but a resource. Thus, the task of the integration workers is to help the refugees acknowledge the competences they already have and to motivate them to apply them in a way that will match the needs of the municipality. In the quote above, there is also an awareness that the municipality cannot take for granted that the refugees' resources will prove useful if the people (integration workers) who meet them upon arrival do not facilitate this implementation. In other words, it is essential that the host municipality takes proactive and innovative steps to integrate newcomers, which is precisely what the leader of Fjord's integration service claims to be doing. Moreover, for the leader of the integration services, there seems to be no worries that the rural municipality will not have enough to offer the newcomers.

Another important part of the success story we found in Fjord is the positive attitude of the local industry, the local community and local politicians:

[T]he local industry and businesses have an almost 100% positive attitude [toward refugees]. It doesn't matter where you're from, as long as we can relate to you, and that you do your job well. And that is the impression I get when we visit workplaces with people in training or work – there are no negative attitudes in the industry. (...) I think we as a region should be proud of what we have achieved together. Those of us who work at the integration service should not take all of the credit; everyone who lives here may have contributed in one way or another, and then there is of course the political will to see it through that has been absolutely decisive (leader of the integration services).

Here, we again see how the work of the immigration service is underlined as important for immigrant integration, but also that this is a joint effort that involves all parts of the local community. By presenting the success and the strategies behind it as a joint effort of the local community, the leader also draws on a positive notion of rurality, which we have seen is quite strong in the Norwegian context (Aure et al., 2018; Berg-Nordlie, 2018).

Although the narrative is largely positive, the integration narrative in Fjord also includes some concrete challenges. In several of the interviews, a common concern arose about how not all

refugees were equally eager to further their own qualification process as much as the integration services expected. For example, several teachers were frustrated that some of the people taking the introduction programme spent too little time on language training and did not take the advantage of opportunities to practice Norwegian. One of the programme coordinators expressed it like this:

One group that has had particular difficulty getting jobs and education is Somalian women. They have no education, no clear goals, no goals for the future. What they want is to be at home with their kids, and they have no great wish to be active in work life. And if they do, it's in cleaning, but when they find out what it takes to be a cleaner, for instance regarding work hours, it isn't so easy if you're a single mum. And then the idea falls flat, and they can't think of anything else.

Although the immigration service, the local labour market and politicians are presented as someone doing their best to make integration happen, some of the refugees, then, are described as potential threats to the idea of 'successful integration'. In addition, the 'old inhabitants', that is those who are not themselves immigrants, were described as being poor at including the refugees in relevant activities as well as being reluctant to take part in activities set up by the integration service or volunteer organizations. In line with this, several of the integration workers explicitly expressed their frustration over businesses who did not want to take in refugees for language or work training, or who took them in without taking responsibility for activating the refugees' competences, supporting their language learning and including them into the work environment and the local community. These frustrations about individuals or groups of locals, which the integration workers saw as either ignorant or sceptical towards foreigners, mirror a well-known characteristic of rural areas which is found both internationally and in Norway (Valenta, 2007; Villa, 2019). Still, in the integration narratives of Fjord, neither the reluctant Somali women nor the ignorant or negative 'old locals' come forth as very important, and they do not challenge the narratives' overarching focus on success. The negative experiences still have a function, though, in the sense that they convey an understanding that successful immigrant integration is not something one can take for granted. As a local community and as an integration service in a relatively small municipality in rural Norway, you have to be forward-leaning, dynamic and progressive.

## **BAY: A NARRATIVE OF THE CLOSE-KNIT AND CARING MUNICIPALITY**

An article in the local newspaper appears to condensate Bay's experience when it comes to settling refugees – an experience they share with many rural communities that also have a limited labour market and few educational possibilities. The article features a former refugee who spent his first years in Norway in Bay but who has since moved to a bigger city to pursue a challenging higher education. The article describes this as an impressive achievement and a personal success, but the main focus lies on the ties that still connect him to Bay. He says that he returns to the village as often as possible and that job opportunities will determine whether he will one day be able to move back. However, those prospects are not promising. The story resonates very well with what we found to be an overarching theme in the narratives of Bay's integration workers, namely that in spite of their – and the local population's – efforts and good will, and in spite of the ties that refugees develop with the community, the settled refugees end up having to leave after a few years. One of the longest serving employees in the adult education service told us:

[L]et me think, there are some families left ... But most of the teenagers I had in the beginning, they've moved... We didn't settle so many families with children in the beginning, but now we do, so I hope more of them stay. I do. But, no, sadly most of them leave, yes.

The refugees leave the municipality for more urban settings despite the fact that they – according to the leader of the immigration service – ‘say that they are very happy in Bay, and feel they make friends here’. This comment suggests that leaving is neither the refugees’ choice nor Bay’s fault, and it points to the paradoxical situation that regardless of the refugees’ wishes and the services’ good work, other factors – first and foremost the pressure to obtain employment – lead to relocation. An employee in the adult education service explained:

[I]t's natural that they move, especially when there aren't any jobs here. But very many of them say that if there had been work for them here, they would very much have liked to stay, because they have some Norwegian friends.

A baseline in the narratives is Bay's qualities as a small and tight-knit community. Friendships and social bonds emerge as central, both in accounts of village life and in descriptions of the integration of refugees. Indeed, the close and informal relationships among people in the village were often mentioned as the most important factor for integration and retention. As the leader of the immigration service shared:

It's work, and not to mention close relationships [that keep them here]. Because quite a few of the children have almost gotten 'grandparents' here. ... Some of them have a very close connection. Some of the children pop by their 'grandmother' after school. So, for them it can be difficult to move.

Given that Bay is a small community, the inhabitants often have multiplex and personal relations to each other. In addition to their role as civil servants and their professional engagement in integration, they are sometimes also the refugees' neighbour, their co-member in voluntary organizations or their kids' football coach. In the narratives, the informal and unorganized nature of social relationships in Bay was emphasized:

We have many [local] volunteers who aren't in a way officially part of an organization but who help. They're individuals who are in contact with very many refugees, and they always have their door open to newcomers. They can have dinner together, or do driving practice, meet up and visit each other. But they do it as individuals. And this is their connection to the community.

Due to the high departure of youth, Bay has many older inhabitants, some of whom have been particularly invested in assisting the refugees in their everyday lives. The immigration workers describe these older volunteers as an important resource that complements the municipal integration work in Bay. The family-like and everyday-oriented dimension of the relations was also described as a more 'natural' way of social life in the village. In contrast, an earlier failed attempt by the Red Cross at recruiting so-called refugee guides in the village was explained by the same logic, that the initiative had been too organized and formal, whereas in Bay social relations, care

and support do not need to be formally organized. This can be understood as a way of presenting Bay as a place where settled refugees are naturally taken care of and included.

The narrative also extends to the integration services' own performance. When asked to describe what the service excels at, an employee answered, 'I would say that we see each individual. And we're not distant, we're close. And we have time to listen'. When asked to compare local integration services to those in the bigger cities, integration workers described their work as less 'bureaucratic' and underlined their will to go 'beyond the formal'. They also commented that the employees in the different local services all knew each other and could easily access one another for advice or information – an efficient 'short-cut' they believed impossible in urban settings. An employee at the adult education service presented this as a result of the small-scale conditions of the municipality:

There's not a lot of us, if you see what I mean. It's easy to pick up the phone, and that makes things more personal, you know, when the conditions are so intimate (...)  
The advantage is that we have a better overview and see ... the connections between problems a lot better.

Thus, the informal and somewhat un-bureaucratic relations between refugees and employees in the local services become interlaced with a broader narrative about the 'natural' close social ties and good will in the community and contribute to explain why refugees, according to the integration workers, would have wanted to stay. Yet, the reality remains that most of the settled refugees actually end up leaving for other places, which is narrated as caused by the limited, often non-existent, possibilities in the local labour market. The leader of Bay's adult education explained:

We have cases with people who live here but can't find a job – and the kids are happy here, the parents are happy here, but if they can't find a job here, they have to look elsewhere, and the same goes for everyone. The law says so, you know, that if you're out of work you're obligated to take anything you can get, anywhere in Norway. And the same law applies for the refugees too. Or for the immigrants. If you've come here and don't get a job, you have to move.

In the narratives, integration in Bay is portrayed as facing difficult circumstances, but the circumstances are understood as created by the national authorities' employment-fixated policies. Some of the integration workers feel that the municipality's work to integrate refugees in the local community is in fact counteracted by political directives from above. The situation is a source of great frustration for integration workers in Bay, who feel that their efforts and good work pass unrecognized:

[T]hat's the goal, to get them employed and in education quicker. Because that's what integration is, isn't it, that's what we're being measured by. We're not measured by how big a social network someone has. Our job is assessed by the results of how quickly they get jobs or an education. That's the end result.

This sentiment was shared by a colleague of hers, who pointed at the aspects of integration that Bay succeeds with, but that do not count when the authorities' measure desired results:

[Work is] very, very important, but I think that there are other aspects of integration that aren't perhaps measured to the same extent, like whether they're happy here, how much contact they have with Norwegians, [and] participation in the community, apart from work.

It is significant that Bay's labour market is also difficult for many locally born inhabitants. The narrative about the difficult conditions for local integration work should therefore be understood in relation to a broader local narrative about 'everyone's vulnerability' when it comes to employment. Against the national discourses' insistence on employment as key to integration, Bays' integration workers narrate local integration as successful in creating wellbeing and belonging, pointing at the inclusion of refugees in close-knit social networks and at refugees' unwillingness to leave as evidence of this success. The municipality's main integration challenge – that refugees eventually do leave – is presented as a problem created by national political priorities and, to some extent, also caused by external, global forces that affect the activities of the mechanical workshop. The narratives thus redefine and relocate the 'problem' and emphasize instead other aspects of integration as more significant, namely Bay's qualities as a good place to stay.

## **NARRATIVES OF REFUGEE SETTLEMENT AND THE RURAL**

Drawing on the empirical data presented earlier, we argue that narratives of integration can shed light both on local understandings of integration and on ideas about qualities of rural municipalities as places to live. The material shows that (different) positive representations of rural life are (re)produced in the integration narratives. In the analysis, we have drawn on perspectives of the rural as socially constructed, and we have approached these processes as dynamic narrative constructions of place identity. This approach allowed us to see that rather than drawing on and reproducing one notion of the rural, different notions are constructed, and this must be understood in the context of local realities.

In Fjord, the overarching integration narrative is one of the forward-leaning and progressive municipality, which we interpret as a narrative that seeks to overwrite notions of the rural as traditional, unchanging and closed-minded. The integration narrative frames local initiatives and efforts towards settled refugees as an expression of the success of a broader strategy of local and regional development and stands to demonstrate the municipality's willingness to meet challenges and embrace transformation. Integration doubly symbolizes success, pointing to the municipality's ability to comply with national targets as well as its ability to supply local industries with much-needed labour. This could also explain why certain challenges appear somewhat understated; for example, some refugee women, according to integration workers, do not want to take on paid work but rather stay at home and fill the traditional role as housewives. Further, this notion of successful integration is also part of a wider narrative about the rural and the urban, framed as a struggle between centre and periphery, which in Fjord's proud case is won by the 'underdog'.

In Bay, more familiar imaginaries of the rural were engaged, as the community was presented as made up of close-knit, caring and personal relations, and otherwise characterized as a peaceful and family-friendly place of wellbeing. The overarching integration narrative draws on and reproduces these as unique rural place qualities that favour integration and underlines the centrality of personal relations over, for example, employment. The narrative presents Bay's integration services as able to offer something that urban services presumably cannot, namely a more personal

and 'warm' support, which explains why they succeed in creating feelings of belonging among the settled refugees. On the other hand, potential local resistance to refugee settlement is left out of the narrative, although one might presume that there are diverse opinions about it also in this 'tight-knit' community.

Importantly, the narratives analysed here are those of integration workers, who are, for example, local inhabitants with an (often manifold) attachment to the place and who also have a professional interest in maintaining an image of integration work in their own municipality as good. Their narratives must be understood in relation to this particular positionality. Following from this, the narratives we have analysed may stand in contrast to other narratives of integration in the municipality that are not analysed here, for example those of settled refugees or those of local inhabitants with no contact with refugees. To further research on rural integration, it is necessary to explore these other narratives, and we make a step in that direction in a forthcoming article where we analyse refugees' narratives of integration in one of the two municipalities (Sætermo, Gjertsen Penner & Kristensen, in review).

Moreover, the two positive, albeit different, rural integration narratives that we have identified in this article should be seen in a wider context of (successful) refugee settlement as a way to counter depopulation (Aure et al., 2018; Rye, 2018). Both narratives present integration in rural areas as not only possible, but favourable, for both the state and the municipality and for the refugees themselves. From the national authorities' perspectives, such narratives are important because they strengthen the legitimacy of the refugee dispersal policies. However, the narratives also target the inhabitants of the municipalities because refugee settlement is a local political decision that ultimately relies on support from a local population that may have concerns about potential economic, social or cultural 'costs' of refugee settlement (Kristensen & Gullikstad, 2022). Finally, the positive frame also serves the purpose of making newcomers feel welcome, by emphasizing the commitment and good will of those who are there to assist them.

The findings also link up to an insistence on the part of many integration researchers that integration should be studied in its local context, and not only as a national matter (Hadj Abdou, 2019; Sætermo et al., 2021). The findings in our analysis echo some of the insights from this research, in that in its local settings, integration is typically approached pragmatically and in relation to aims of revitalization and development, as opposed to national narratives in which integration is often presented as 'a problem to be solved' (Brekke & Mohn, 2018; Gullikstad & Kristensen, 2021). Local narratives of integration, such as those studied here, make integration a 'local thing' by drawing on and reproducing notions of rural place qualities that favour and facilitate integration, in ways that tap into the local population's notions of the place. This, we argue, has a wider purpose than just self-appreciation. Being able to retain both existing inhabitants and newcomers, including settled refugees, is crucial for these municipalities' futures, and it is therefore important to maintain a local spirit of success and worthwhileness. Drawing on recognizable local narratives of the place, refugee settlement and integration can be presented as 'natural' for the municipality. For Fjord, it is 'natural' given the municipality's progressive spirit, whereas in Bay, it is linked to the close-knit community's 'natural' capacity to care for and include community members.

Yet, local narratives must be seen against the backdrop of national integration discourses, which strongly uphold paid employment as a marker of success, thereby suggesting that some 'success stories' are more valid than others. For example, Fjord's narratives can be interpreted as a narrative of doing 'everything right' and doing what they are encouraged to do from above (the national level), making the municipality a 'deserving' recipient of future settlement. The narratives portray local integration philosophy and practical integration work as very much in line with national integration policy goals, and there is little resistance against national

integration policies. In contrast, Bay's overarching narrative is more critical towards national integration policies, which are presented as undermining the good work that is done locally and imposing on Bay the undeserved outcome of refugees having to move away. National integration goals are here interpreted as both unachievable and counter-productive, and the narrative can thus be read as challenging or seeking to redefine the notion of success defined 'from above'.

The Norwegian refugee dispersal policies and the strong municipal autonomy in questions of refugee settlement are important contexts for the analysis of our findings. These contexts, perhaps, make the cases special vis-a-vis other national contexts. However, the role that local ideas of rural areas as places to live play in local integration work and the ways that these shape local understandings of integration are findings that are relevant more broadly. In the light of the growing tendency towards promoting rural settlement of refugees in many European countries, it becomes important to study the longer term effects of settlement in rural areas and the effects of rural integration work.

The empirical insights presented in this article show that notions of the rural manifest themselves in differing ways in local integration narratives. Rather than being concerned with outcomes of integration in rural areas, we have used integration as an analytical lens through which we have explored local notions of the rural. At the same time, we have been able to discern how notions of integration are also produced in interplay with specific (and different) ideas of the qualities of rural communities. This approach enabled us to shed light on the complex processes of meaning-making that underpin local narratives of refugee settlement and integration and thus better grasp their fuller meaning. It also points to the benefit of studying social constructions of the rural through a focus on narratives more broadly.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank the participants who took part in the studies.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data is not shared.

## ORCID

Turid Sætermo PhD  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8921-9954>

## REFERENCES

- Aasbrenn, K., & Sørli, K. (2016) Uttynningsamfunnet—25 år etter [The thinning society: 25 years later]. In: Villa, M. & Haugen, M.S. (Eds.) *Lokalsamfunn* [Local communities]. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, pp. 152–176.
- Anthopoulou, T., Kaberis, N., & Petrou, M. (2017). Aspects and experiences of crisis in rural Greece. Narratives of rural resilience. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 52, 1–11.
- Arruda, A. (2015) Image, social imaginary and social representations. In Sammut, G., Andreouli, E., Gaskell, G. & Valsiner, J. (Eds.) *The Cambridge handbook of social representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 128–142.
- Aure, M., Førde, A. & Magnussen, T. (2018) Will migrant workers rescue rural regions? Challenges of creating stability through mobility. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 60, 52–59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.03.005>
- Berg-Nordlie, M. (2018) New in town: small-town media discourses on immigrants and immigration. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 64, 210–219. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.05.007>

- Bo, I.G., Christensen, A.D. & Thomsen, T.L. (Eds.) (2016). *Narrativ forskning: Tilgange og metoder*. [Narrative Research. Approaches and methods]. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels forlag.
- Brekke, J.-P. & Mohn, F. (2018). *Holdninger til innvandring og integrering i Norge: Integreringsbarometeret 2018*. [Attitudes towards Immigration and Integration in Norway. The Integration Barometer]. Norway: Institutt for samfunnsforskning. Report.
- Brochmann, G. & Hagelund, A. (2010) *Velferdens grenser. Innvandringspolitikk og velferdsstat i Skandinavia 1945–2010*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Bråta, H. O. (2020) *Kommuner med befolkningsnedgang: Hva sier forskningen om ulike strategier, planer og tiltak og hva er kunnskapsbehovet?* [Municipalities with population decline: What does the research say about different strategies, plans and measures, and what is the knowledge need?]. Norway: Østlandsforskning: Eastern Norway Research Institution. (Skriftserien 17) Report. [https://brage.inn.no/inn-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2727174/Skriftserien17\\_20\\_online.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y](https://brage.inn.no/inn-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2727174/Skriftserien17_20_online.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y)
- Careja, R. (2019) Making good citizens: local authorities' integration measures navigate national policies and local realities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(8), 1327–1344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1441613>
- Caponio, T. & Borkert, M. (2010) *The local dimension of migration policymaking*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Djuve, A. B. & Kavli, H. C. (2000). *Styring over eget liv. Levekår og flytteaktivitet blant flyktninger i lys av myndighetenes bosettingsarbeid* [Control over one's own life: Life quality and relocation activity among refugees in light of the authorities' settlement work]. Norway: Fafo. Report number: 345. <https://www.fafo.no/zoo-publikasjoner/fafo-rapporter/item/styring-over-eget-liv>
- Elliott, J. (2005) *Using narrative in social research: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Emilsson, H. (2015) A national turn of local integration policy: multi-level governance dynamics in Denmark and Sweden. *Computational Management Science*, 3, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-015-0008-5>
- Espegren, A., Eimhjellen, I., Ervik, R., Guribye, E. & Lindén, T.S. (2019). *Samarbeid mellom offentlig, privat og frivillig sektor i gjennomføringen av introduksjonsprogrammet* [Collaboration between public, private and voluntary sectors in the implementation of the introduction programme]. Riverside, CA: NORCE Samfunnsforskning. Report number: 9. <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2621198>
- Fang, T., Sapeha, H., & Neil, K. (2018) Integration and retention of refugees in smaller communities. *International Migration*, 56, 83–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12517>
- Penninx, R. & Garcés-Mascareñas, B. (2018) Integrationspolitik in europäischen Städten: Strukturelle Konvergenz und substantielle Differenzierung. In Gesemann, F. & Roth, R. (Eds) *Handbuch Lokale Integrationspolitik*. Wiesbaden: Springer, pp. 837–868.
- Gullikstad, B., & Kristensen, G. K. (2021) “Vi er jo et mangfoldssamfunn”. Mangfold som offentlig integreringsfortelling: (re)produksjon av likhet og ulikhet [«We are society with diversity». Diversity as public integration narrative: (re)production of sameness and difference]. In: Gullikstad, B., Kristensen, G.K. & Sætermo, T.F. (Eds.) *Fortellinger om integrering i norske lokalsamfunn* [Stories about integration in Norwegian local communities]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 40–63.
- Haaland, H., Magnussen, M.-L., Wallevik, H., & ogFrykmann, M. (2021) Ulike måter å “sikre sted”: Flyktningers fortellinger om integrering inn i et lokalsamfunn i Sør-Norge. [“Various ways of securing place”: Refugees' narratives on integration in a local community in Southern Norway]. In Gullikstad, B., Kristensen, G.K. & Sætermo T.F. (Eds.) *Fortellinger om integrering i norske lokalsamfunn* [Stories about integration in Norwegian local communities]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 180–202.
- Hadj Abdou, L. (2019) Immigrant integration: the governance of ethno-cultural differences. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 7(15), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0124-8>
- Halfacree, K. (1993). Locality and social representation: Space, discourse and alternative definitions of the rural. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 9, 23–37. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167\(93\)90003-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(93)90003-3)
- Haugen, M. S. & Lysgård, H. K. (2006) Discourses of rurality in a Norwegian context.. *Norwegian journal of Geography*, 60(3), 174–178.
- Hedberg, C. & Haandrikman, K. (2014) Repopulation of the Swedish countryside: globalisation by international migration. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 34, 128–138. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2014.01.005>
- Herslund, L., & Paulgaard, G. (2021). Refugees' Encounters With Nordic Rural Areas–Darkness, Wind and “Hygge”!. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 6, 623686.



- Hernes, V. (2017) Central coercion or local autonomy? A comparative analysis of policy instrument choice in refugee settlement policies. *Local Government Studies*, 43(5), 798–819. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2017.1342627>
- Hernes, V., Arendt, J. N., Joonas, P. A., & Tronstad, K. R. (2019) *Nordic integration and settlement policies for refugees: a comparative analysis of labour market integration outcomes*. Denmark: Nordic Council of Ministers.
- Hof, H., Pemberton, S., & Pietka-Nykaza, E. (2021) EU migrant retention and the temporalities of migrant staying: a new conceptual framework. *CMS*, 9, 19. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-021-00225-5>
- Jørgensen, M. B. (2012) The diverging logics of integration policy making at national and city level. *International Migration Review*, 46(19), 244–278. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2012.00886.x>
- Kristensen, G. K. & Gullikstad, B. (2022) Rural authenticity as cosmopolitan modernity? Local political narratives on immigration and integration in rural Norway. In: Fuglestad, E., Figueiredo, E. & Pavel, P. (Eds.) *The politics and policy of rural authenticity*. London: Routledge.
- Kristensen, G. K. & Sætermo, T. (2021) Hvordan lykkes med integrering? Stedsproduserende fortellinger om integreringsarbeid i to rurale kommuner. [How to succeed with integration? [Place-producing narratives about integration work in two rural municipalities]. In: Gullikstad, B., Kristensen, G.K. & Sætermo T.F. (Eds.) *Fortellinger om integrering i norske lokalsamfunn* [Stories about integration in Norwegian local communities]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 203–223.
- Lynnebakke, B. (2021) 'I felt like the mountains were coming for me.'—The role of place attachment and local lifestyle opportunities for labour migrants' staying aspirations in two Norwegian rural municipalities. *Migration Studies*, 9(3), 759–782. <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnaa002>
- Lønning, D. J. & Teigen, H. (2009) *Tilflytting til småsteder og distrikt. Kva tiltak verkar? Ein kunnskapsstudie av utviklingsrelevante norske bidrag frå perioden 1999–2009* [Relocation to small places and districts: What measures work? A knowledge study on development-relevant Norwegian contributions from the period 1999–2009]. Nordlandsforskning/Høgskolen i Lillehammer. Report. [https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/krd/regionalnytt/201001\\_regionalnytt/teigenoglonning.pdf](https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/krd/regionalnytt/201001_regionalnytt/teigenoglonning.pdf)
- McAreevey, R. & Argent, N. (2018) New immigration destinations (NID): unravelling the challenges and opportunities for migrants and for host communities. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 64(1), 148–152. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.09.006>
- Meissner, F. & Tilmann, H. (2020) Deromanticising integration: on the importance of convivial disintegration. *Migration Studies*, mnz056, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnz056>
- Munkejord, M. C. (2016) Lokalsamfunnets betydning i innvandreres fortellinger om å starte egen virksomhet. [The local community's position in immigrants' narratives about setting up their own businesses.]. In: Villa, M. & Haugen, M.S. (Eds.) *Lokalsamfunn* [Local community]. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Nordic Council of Ministers (2023) *Labour market attachment in the nordic countries. Towards a more inclusive labour market in the Nordics 1*. Report. TemaNord 2023:501
- NOU: Norges Offentlige Utredninger. (2011) *Velferd og migrasjon. Den norske modellens fremtid* [Welfare and migration: the future of the Norwegian model]. Oslo: Barne-, likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet (No. 7). [Report]. <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2011-07/id642496/?ch=1>
- NOU 2020:15 (2020). *Det handler om Norge — Utredning om konsekvenser av demografiutfordringer i distriktene*. Kommunal og distriksdepartementet.
- Patuzzi, L., Andriescu, M., & Pietropolli, A. (2020) *Building welcome from the ground up. European small and rural communities engaging in refugee resettlement*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.
- Phoenix, A. (2007) Claiming liveable lives. Adult subjectification and narratives of 'non-normative' childhood experiences. In: Kofoed, J. & Stanæs, D. (Eds.) *Magtballader – 14 fortellinger om magt, modstand og menneskers tilblivelse* [Power ballads: 14 stories about power, resistance and human creation]. Denmark: Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitetsforlag, pp. 178–193.
- Proietti, P. & Veneri, P. (2021) The location of Hosted asylum seekers in OECD regions and cities. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(1), 1243–1268. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fez001>
- Rye, J. F. (2006) Leaving the countryside. An analysis of rural-to-urban migration and long-term capital accumulation. *Acta Sociologica*, 49(1), 47–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699306061899>
- Rye, J. F. (2018) Labour migrants and rural change: the 'mobility transformation' of Hitra/Frøya, Norway, 2005–2015. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 64, 189–199. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.12.003>
- Sampedro, R., & Camarero, L. (2020) Foreign immigration to rural Spain: an exploration of the precarious rural cosmopolitanism in the post-crisis scenario. In: F. Döner, E. Figueiredo & M. Rivera (Eds.) *Crisis and postcrisis*

- in rural territories: social change, challenges and opportunities in Southern and Mediterranean Europe*. Cham: Springer, pp. 9–30.
- Schech, S. (2014) Silent bargain or rural cosmopolitanism? Refugee settlement in regional Australia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40(4), 601–618. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.830882>
- Scholten, P. (2013). Agenda dynamics and the multilevel governance of migrant integration: The case of Dutch migrant integration policies. *Policy Sciences*, 46, 217–236. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-012-9170-x>
- Soares da Silva, D., Figueiredo, E., Eusébio, C., & Carneiro, M. J. (2016) The countryside is worth a thousand words—Portuguese representations on rural areas. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 44, 77–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.01.012>
- Somers, M. R. (1994) The narrative constitution of identity: a relational and network approach. *Theory and Society*, 23(5), 605–649. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00992905>
- Statistics Norway (SSB) (2017). *Monitor for sekundærflytting* [Monitor for relocation]. Rapport 2017/18. <https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/monitor-for-sekundaerflytting-2017>
- Steen, A., & Røed, M. (2018) State governance or local agency? Determining refugee settlement in Norwegian municipalities. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, 22(1), 27–52. <https://doi.org/10.58235/sjpa.v22i1.11473>
- St.meld. 27 (2022–2023) *Eit godt liv i heile Noreg – distriktpolitikk for framtida*. Kommunal- og distriksdepartementet.
- Stokowski, P. A., Kuentzel, W. F., Derrien, M. M., & Jakobcic, Y. L. (2021) Social, cultural and spatial imaginaries in rural tourism transitions. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 87, 243–253. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.09.011>
- Søholt, S., Tronstad, K. R., & Bjørnsen, H. M. (2014) *Innvandrere og sysselsetting i et regionalt perspektiv: En kunnskapsoppsummering* [Immigrants and employment in a regional perspective: a summary of knowledge]. Norsk institutt for by- og regionforskning. Report: No. 25. <https://distriktssenteret.no/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Kunnskapsoppsummering-endelig.pdf>
- Søholt, S., Aasland, A., Onsager, K., & Vestby, G. M. (2012) ‘Derfor blir vi her’. *Innvandrere i Distrikts-Norge* [‘That is why we stay here’: Immigrants remaining in rural Norway]. Norsk institutt for by- og regionforskning. Report: No. 5. <https://distriktssenteret.no/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/nibr-rapport-2012-5.pdf>
- Søholt, S., Stenbacka, S., & Nørgaard, H. (2018) Conditioned receptiveness: Nordic rural elite perceptions of immigrant contributions to local resilience. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 64, 220–229. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.05.004>
- Søholt, S., & Aasland, A. (2021) Enhanced local-level willingness and ability to settle refugees: Decentralization and local responses to the refugee crisis in Norway. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 43(6), 781–798. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2019.1569465>
- Sætermo, T. F., Gullikstad, B., & Kristensen, G. K. (2021) Å studere fortellinger om integrering i en lokalsamfunnskontekst: En introduksjon til et komplekst forskningsfelt [Studying stories about integration in a local social context: an introduction to a complex research field]. In: B. Gullikstad, G.K. Kristensen & T.F. Sætermo (Eds.) *Fortellinger om integrering i norske lokalsamfunn* [Stories about integration in Norwegian local communities]. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 11–39.
- Tronstad & Joonas, (2013) *New patterns of migration from Central and Eastern Europe to the Nordic countries*. København: Nordisk ministerråd.
- Tønnesen, M., & Andersen, S. N. (2019) *Bosettingskommune og integrering blant voksne flyktninger. Hvem bosettes hvor, og hva er sammenhengen mellom bosettingskommunens egenskaper og videre integreringsutfall?* [Settlement municipalities and integration among adult refugees: Who settles where, and what is the connection between the characteristics of the settlement municipality and further integration outcomes]. Statistisk Sentralbyrå. Report: No. 13. <https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/bosettingskommune-og-integrering-blant-voksne-flyktninger>
- Valenta, M. (2007) Daily life and social integration of immigrants in city and small town: evidence from Norway. *International Journal on Multicultural Societies (IJMS)*, 9(2), 284–306.
- Valenta, M., & Bunar, N. (2010) State assisted integration: refugee integration policies in scandinavian welfare states: the Swedish and Norwegian experience. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 23(4), 463–483. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feq028>
- Villa, M. (2019) Local ambivalence to diverse mobilities: The case of a Norwegian rural village. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 59(4), 701–717. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12263>

Zapata-Barrero, R., Caponio, T., & Scholten, P. (2017) Theorizing the 'local turn' in a multi-level governance framework of analysis: a case study in immigrant policies. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 83(2), 241–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852316688426>

**How to cite this article:** Sætermo, T. & Kristensen, G.K. (2024) Personal, peaceful, progressive: integration workers' narratives of refugee settlement and the rural. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 64, 149–167. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12464>