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## REFUGEE RECEPTION WITHIN A COMMON EUROPEAN ASYLUM SYSTEM: LOOKING AT CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES THROUGH A LOCAL-TO-LOCAL COMPARISON

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**Summary:** Research on the governance of refugees has until recently remained conceptualized with the national perspective as a starting point. This article compares asylum governance at the local level between Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, focusing on the often sensitive and highly debated issue of reception and accommodation. The central idea is to determine convergences and divergences of local reception structures and efforts, and how they are linked to the governance levels situated above them. Despite municipalities having been greatly affected by, and having shaped in practice, reception and integration processes of asylum seekers and refugees, so far there has been little in terms of comparative research across countries in Europe. Our findings emerging from the comparison suggest that top-down implementations of asylum reception have created numerous problems and protest on the ground, especially when the local population and local stakeholders were not involved in the decision-making process. On the one hand, the case studies show that within each national setting, the local regimes and agencies can shape divergent reception outcomes in terms of integrative or disintegrative policies. On the other hand, converging developments in the local cases across national contexts, such as the impact of the local political climate, suggest the crucial impact of local reception regimes and agencies, notwithstanding varying regulatory frameworks and procedures. We thus underline the importance of local-to-local comparison, and not only national-to-national, when it comes to analysing refugee reception.

**Zusammenfassung:** Forschungen zur Implementierung von Asylpolitik verbleiben meist auf der nationalen Betrachtungsebene. Dieser Artikel nimmt einen lokalen Fokus ein, um Aufnahmepolitiken von Asylsuchenden in Deutschland, Luxemburg und den Niederlanden zu vergleichen. Der Beitrag hat zum Ziel, konvergierende und divergierende Strategien, Praktiken und Effekte zu identifizieren und die Verbindungen zu den übergeordneten Politikebenen zu analysieren. Obgleich die kommunale Ebene ganz wesentlich die Aufnahme von Asylsuchenden verantwortet und individuelle Aufnahme- und Integrationspraktiken entwickelt, gibt es dazu bislang kaum länderübergreifende vergleichende Forschung. Die Befunde unserer vergleichenden Lokalforschung zeigen, dass die zentrale Steuerung der Aufnahme Asylsuchender auf kommunaler Ebene verschiedene Probleme und Protesthaltungen erzeugt hat, insbesondere wenn die Bevölkerung und die Entscheidungsträger vor Ort nicht in den Entscheidungsprozess einbezogen wurden. Es zeigt sich, dass innerhalb des identischen nationalen Rahmens Aufnahmepolitiken höchst unterschiedliche Resultate zeitigen können, z.B. durch die Implementierung integrativer oder partikularer Politikansätze. Andererseits weisen konvergierende Entwicklungen in unseren Fallbeispielen auf die Bedeutung lokaler Aushandlungsprozesse und Diskurse hin, die sich trotz unterschiedlicher nationaler Regulierungen und Rahmenbedingungen in vergleichbarer Weise entwickeln können. Dadurch unterstreicht dieser Beitrag die Bedeutung von länderübergreifenden Lokalstudien und die generelle Bedeutung der lokalen Ebene in der vergleichenden Implementierungsforschung.

**Keywords:** asylum, common European asylum system, local turn, multi-level governance

### 1 Introduction

While there has been a ‘local turn’ in the study of migration governance and a recognition of its multilevel dimension (see e.g. FILOMENO 2017), research on the governance of refugee reception has until recently remained conceptualized with the national perspective as a starting point (see DOOMERNIK and GLORIUS 2016). This level is often a relevant perspective, as reception policies are elaborated on the national level and – in the case

of the EU – framed by the supra-national level. However, it is at the local level that the reception of asylum seekers and refugees takes place, and where issues such as accommodation, labour market access or social integration are tackled in practice. In recent years, municipalities all over Europe have been involved in, and have shaped, reception and integration processes of asylum seekers. However, in times of a Common European Asylum System (CEAS) under stress there has been little research on the convergences and divergences of local recep-

tion structures between different European countries, and on how these efforts are linked to the governance levels situated above them.

Our main argument is that an analysis of those varying local reception regimes in the context of the CEAS under stress needs to combine different perspectives on the role of the local level and the concomitant actor constellations. On the national and supra-national levels, regulations have a strongly normative character and are constructed and implemented within a standardized perception of place based on legal grounds. At the local level, these policies are implemented, experienced and possibly contested. The constellations of actors involved and affected can be highly divergent, and their practices are not solely bound to norms and legal directives. In this article, we demonstrate how links between different geographical levels of analysis can be established in the research on refugee reception.

The structure of the paper is as follows: section 2 sets out the conceptual basis for this article, critically reflecting on the role of the local and its contribution to our understanding of multilevel governance processes. The third section provides an analysis of the refugee reception systems in Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, focusing on the local level. Accommodation policies for refugees and their challenges give an insight into convergences and divergences of implementation at the local level. This highlights the variety of political framing of refugee reception, in terms of structures and actor constellations across these countries, which are further discussed in the fourth section. The final section wraps up the arguments made above and draws some generalizing conclusions.

## 2 Conceptual considerations

### 2.1 The local turn in governance research

There are at least three perspectives on the meaning of a 'local turn': 1) It can refer to the broader category of a 'spatial turn', which was postulated in cultural studies and social sciences at least since the 1990s and called for a reintroduction of *space* as an analytical category for the research of social phenomena (see e.g. BACHMANN-MEDIK 2016, 211 ff.; WARF and ARIAS 2009); 2) the 'local turn' refers also to the increased perception of the relevance of local settings and the role of local governments in mul-

tilevel governance frameworks (STEPHENSON 2013; ZAPATO-BARRERO et al. 2017); and 3) 'local turn' reflects a methodological debate on comparative frameworks in regional studies and the problem of generalizing from those multifaceted constellations and contingent developments which can be found when implementing a comparative case study design (BELINA and MIGGELBRINK 2010; VOGELPOHL 2013).

Regarding the issue of migrant integration, GLICK SCHILLER and CAĞLAR (2011, p. 63) conceptualize the 'local' as a spatio-temporal setting which determines a specific opportunity structure in which migrants' integration trajectories can unfold. This is not only meant in terms of geographical, economic or social context, but also in terms of local actor constellations, problem perceptions and civic cultures which determine how the task of migrant integration is approached within a specific municipality. Within a multilevel governance research framework, the local perspective can "contribute to a more in-depth understanding of why and how cities and regions respond differently to similar challenges, and of why and how these different answers can affect state-based models of immigration management" (ZAPATO-BARRERO et al. 2017, p. 2). GILL (2010) mentions that there has been an essentialization of the state, and a lack of attention to what is going on inside and beyond state structures. The changing role of the local level is particularly evident in the case of networks of cities claiming a greater role in the asylum decision-making processes at EU level by becoming 'cities of refuge' (EUROCITIES 2015; DOOMERNIK and ARDON 2018).

However, when it comes to the implementation of multilevel governance research, the focus is less clear. As GLICK SCHILLER and CAĞLAR (2011, 69) criticize, the core of the 'local turn', which is the complexity of structural settings and actor constellations, tends not to be integrated in a consistent research frame, but "first highlighted and then put aside in matters of theory". PURCELL (2006, p. 1921) also argues against the 'local trap' when he states that "any scale or scalar strategy can result in any outcome". The argument developed in this article is that at the local level – even when socially constructed – specific interactions in refugee reception processes take place, and that local and municipal actors have an important role in the reception and integration practice, despite local variations within and across countries, and despite differing national policy frames.

## 2.2 Refugee reception and the role of the local

Responding to the increasing arrivals of asylum seekers since 2013 and the growing interest of political stakeholders in practical questions and best practice in the context of refugee reception, a number of comparative studies of refugee integration have been carried out. However, most of them focus on the national level (see BAKKER et al. 2016; SCHOLTEN et al. 2017).

Existing local case studies reveal power constellations, overlapping policy issues and connected discourses and symbolic narrations which can also be found on other governance levels and thus can serve as a looking glass (DOOMERNIK and GLORIUS 2016, p. 437). However, in a comparative framework the challenge to ‘neutralize’ the multiple contextual framings of each case remains, which is necessary to arrive at generalizations. In methodological terms, qualitative approaches seem to be more apt to handle this challenge, as they are not aiming to statistically prove causalities, but rather reveal certain phenomena that might be generalized.

A further important aspect is the role of agency at the local level. In the field of refugee reception, agency in the context of relational conceptualizations is not only found among ‘administration professionals’ and institutionalized non-state actors, but also among the local population, including the asylum seekers who all can individually and collectively change the social and political order on the local level, with significant effects on other governance levels (e.g. BELLONI 2016; DARLING 2016). It is also worth mentioning that civil society has a great stake in the organization of reception and integration processes, but that they can also unite to effectively oppose the allocation of asylum seekers and thus present the “dark side of civil society” (JÄCKLE and KÖNIG 2017).

In the case of comparative work within a multi-level research frame, a decision is needed on which perspective it will be implemented from: top-down, bottom-up, or local-to-local. In this process, the horizontal and the vertical dimensions serve different research goals. While the horizontal dimension concentrates on the comparison of local cases and examines local governments’ responses to the challenges of migrant reception and integration (see e.g. AMBROSINI 2012; MAHNIG 2004; VERMEULEN and STOTIJN 2010), the vertical dimension addresses the relation between the hierarchical levels (local-regional-national-supranational) in constructing and implementing immigration and integration policies. Relevant research questions within the latter fram-

ing would address the consequences of the proliferation of distinctly local immigration policies for relations with national (and sometimes European) policies, and the role of stakeholders on the different hierarchical levels in this respect (ZAPATO-BARRERO et al. 2017, 4). Our research focuses on the local-to-local comparison, while taking the supra-national and national governance levels as important framing features.

## 2.3 Research methodology

In the next section, a comparison of the reception structures in Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands will be carried out, taking examples from the local level. We focus on the governance of asylum seekers’ redistribution and accommodation. We analyse convergences and divergences and how they connect to the different national contexts. First, we refer to the general reception policies on the national level and the supra-national framing, then we turn to the local level and explore local cases in terms of local framing of asylum seeker allocation, local practices and local citizens’ responses. The data includes document analysis, information based on stakeholder interviews and media analysis. The general aim of this exercise is to understand how local programmes and practices in the field of asylum interact with national and supra-national objectives, what drives internal heterogeneity within each national reception system, and what the key factors are which explain heterogeneity.

By focusing on a local-to-local comparison, we aim to highlight the relevance of national policies and political practices on the one hand, and of local actor constellations, framing features and practices on the other hand. This will help us to highlight the significance of the local level in practical terms for further research and policy-making relevance.

## 3 A comparison of local reception governance in Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands

### 3.1 Regulatory framing and relevant actors

In all three countries, the asylum procedure and the reception process are carried out on the basis of the EU Reception Conditions Directive, Qualification Directive and Asylum Procedures Directive, which have been transposed into national

law. In Germany, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees is in charge of the asylum procedure, while the first reception of asylum seekers is delegated to the federal states. Counties and municipalities are the places of second reception and have to cater for all needs of the asylum seekers during the asylum procedure, which is partly reimbursed by the state. In Luxembourg, the Directorate of Immigration in the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MAEE) is the government institution which deals with asylum procedures, while the Ministry of Family, Integration and the Greater Region (MFIGR) implements the reception and integration policy, and manages the reception centres, through the Luxembourg Reception and Integration Agency (OLAI).<sup>1)</sup> In the Netherlands, the state takes full responsibility for asylum seekers throughout the asylum procedure. The allocation of asylum seekers is organized by the Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers (COA), which is a national, and thus centralized, organization of the Ministry of Justice and Security.

### 3.2 National reception policies and practices

In Germany, newly arriving asylum seekers are distributed among the 16 federal states, based on a quota system in relation to the population size and the tax revenues of the federal states (BAMF 2016, 13). Initial reception is organized in First Reception Facilities (Erstaufnahmeeinrichtung – EAE), which are usually larger compounds, run by social service providers (such as Red Cross, St John's) on behalf of the federal authorities. They provide bunk beds, a canteen and medical care units and, starting from a size of 500 places, an office of the Federal Agency for Migration and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge/BAMF), which is in charge of evaluating the asylum applications and producing decisions on asylum status. Asylum seekers are obliged to stay between six and a maximum of twelve weeks in the EAE in order to be available at any time during the initiation of the asylum procedure.<sup>2)</sup> After having submitted their asylum applications, asylum seek-

ers are redistributed to municipalities, again subject to a distribution key based on fair proportions (cf. AUMÜLLER et al. 2015, p. 22 ff.). Neither the asylum seekers nor the stakeholders at the local level or the local population have a choice in this distribution process.

The local arrangement for accommodation is regulated by state laws and ordinances, which can largely vary, for example with regard to institutional responsibilities and administrative arrangements for initial and long-term accommodation (MÜLLER 2013, p. 15). Generally, the main focus of the asylum management and legal regulations during the application and decision process is on the management of accommodation, while only some federal laws envisage binding agreements with regard to integration measures or the psychosocial care of asylum seekers (AUMÜLLER et al. 2015, p. 22). Furthermore, at the local level, civil society organizations and volunteers play a major role in all aspects of integration of asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers are housed in group accommodation or in individual apartments, which are usually rented and financed by the responsible municipality or county. There is considerable local variety in approaches to housing, based on different assumptions concerning the effects of centralized versus decentralized housing (GLORIUS 2017b), but also due to diverging municipal housing capacities. While some stakeholders pursue a diversification strategy in order to promote integration and avoid segregation, others favour group accommodation for the sake of a more effective reach for integration measures. Once their protection status is recognized, refugees have to leave the group accommodation or sponsored apartments, as they are no longer eligible to receive support under the law for asylum seekers' provisions (AsylbewLG). Those refugees who have no means to sustain themselves are eligible for social benefits just like German citizens, including social housing, but have to find accommodation on their own.

The setting up and running of reception facilities in Luxembourg is characterized by a partial delegation from the national level to the NGO sector, and a flexible approach between the national and the local level, as municipalities do not have an official role in reception, but their indirect involvement can vary from one case to another. All asylum seekers are entitled to a place in one of the reception centres which are organized depending on the stage of the application: first reception, orientation and long-term reception (MFIGR 2018, 153f). Asylum

<sup>1)</sup> This configuration could change in the future, as on 25 January 2019 the government accepted the draft for a new bill which proposes to create a new agency only dealing with reception, and placed under the MAEE.

<sup>2)</sup> Recent policy changes introduced the obligation to stay in the EAE throughout the whole asylum procedure for asylum seekers who originate from so-called safe countries of origin.

seekers are entitled to welfare assistance (material and monetary) and advice, medical insurance and integration measures (MFIGR 2018, p. 156).

The state agency in charge of reception (OLAI) has collaboration agreements with partner organizations (Red Cross and CARITAS) which are in charge of running a share of the reception facilities throughout the country. OLAI also uses external service providers for tasks such as security, catering, cleaning, or technical maintenance in the reception facilities (PETRY et al. 2017, 29). OLAI, Red Cross and CARITAS are in charge of welfare assistance and advice for asylum seekers (JACOBS et al. 2017, 17f.). The social services which depend partly on the municipalities only become involved once asylum seekers living on their territory receive their status. OLAI also works with the association of cities and local authorities in Luxembourg (SYVICOL) to implement integration programmes at the local level, in partnership with municipalities (MFIGR 2018, 157). In general, municipalities do not have a direct role in the reception system of asylum seekers, but can be indirectly involved to a certain degree. Their role becomes more direct once asylum seekers receive their status.

The asylum procedure in the Netherlands starts at the Immigration and Naturalization Service's (IND) Registration Centre, at Schiphol Airport for those arriving by plane or in the peripheral town of Ter Apel. Once an asylum request has been filed, applicants are accommodated in so-called asylum-seeker centres (AZC). Normally, after two weeks the asylum seekers know whether they can stay or are expected to leave. A third possibility is that it can be decided that more time is needed to investigate the claim. This can take a maximum of six months. In practice, the duration of the process strongly depends on rising and falling numbers of applicants. For as long as the procedures last and as long as no resettlement to regular housing is possible for those who are allowed to stay, people remain in an AZC.

AZCs are run by the Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers (COA), which is a centralized organization of the Ministry of Justice and Security. It decides in which AZC it locates an individual asylum seeker. In collaboration with municipalities it moreover determines where its AZCs are located. Similar locations can be in remote and isolated locations as well as in urban areas. Some municipalities volunteer a location for the housing of asylum seekers, for instance because they have suitable vacant premises or because they expect benefits from the integration of refugees.

After the status determination, refugees are entitled to social housing. Each of the country's 380 municipalities is obliged to offer some of its housing stock to newly-arrived refugees. The size of this municipal quota is based on the volume of its resident population. The refugees are at liberty to refuse the apartment or house offered to them but no second option is available (unless the refugee finds their own accommodation). As a consequence, refugees are randomly spread throughout the Netherlands. This obviously impacts their subsequent integration process.

### 3.3 Local case studies in Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands

If we look at reception policies and practices in Germany municipalities, we find welcoming and less welcoming local environments, this difference being largely due to diverging perceptions about the causes and consequences of asylum seeker allocation. In the local political landscape, local stakeholders such as the mayors were found to play a crucial role in creating attentive reception conditions by mediating between higher authorities (who determine the distribution of asylum seekers) and local citizens (GLORIUS 2017a, p. 99). One telling example comes from the municipality of Nossen (10,800 inhabitants), located in the rural county of Meißen in Saxony.<sup>3)</sup> When the number of asylum seekers increased in 2014, the county government requested suitable accommodation, preferably of a size between 30 and 50 places. Because the municipal housing structure could not provide sufficient space, a private landlord offered suitable accommodation in one of the municipality's smaller, remote sub-districts. The county administration, by-passing the mayor, accepted the offer.

Nossen's mayor expressed deep frustration about not having been involved in the deal. However, being unable to offer alternatives, he conceded that he had no arguments against the allocation. By the end of 2014, 35 asylum seekers had moved in. Prior to their arrival, the mayor organized a hearing for the local inhabitants, where he met with large opposition, fuelled by anxiety and fear (for example of people being raped by male asylum seekers, or children being traumatized by black refugee children), but

<sup>3)</sup>The local case studies were carried out in May/June and November/December 2015, comprising field visits, stakeholder interviews and document analysis. The two case studies are further elaborated in GLORIUS and SCHONDELMAYER 2018.

also by practical considerations, such as the complete lack of public infrastructure in the neighbourhood, and the mismatch between the quantity of asylum seekers (up to 50) and the number of local inhabitants (75).

The mayor also stressed that the decision was not locally accepted since it was taken without consulting the population. To calm the situation, long-awaited investments in public infrastructure were made, such as the installation of street lighting along a footpath close to the asylum seekers' accommodation. One of the mayor's larger concerns was the loss of social harmony in town, which would also destabilize his own position.

Another local example of asylum seeker allocation, in the county of Biberach in Baden-Württemberg, reflects major convergences and divergences within the same national policy frame. Here too, the increased number of asylum seekers forced the county administration to find new accommodation. Again, that was found in the more peripheral municipalities with vacant housing. However, the allocation of asylum seekers was prepared with considerable communication efforts on the part of those in charge, jointly with representatives from the churches and NGOs. Principally, the population had the same concerns as in Nossen. In this case, however, these local concerns were addressed by a long-term offer of mediation should conflicts between asylum seekers and the local population arise. Furthermore, best practice examples from other municipalities were shared. This created a positive collective perception: "Okay, that's how it could work out quite well." Also, while in the Nossen case, the allocation of asylum seekers was negatively framed by discourses on cultural otherness and perceptions of insecurity, in Biberach, local discourses brought the possible merits of asylum seeker allocation to the fore, notably their potential for alleviating problems of regional development, such as demographic ageing and lack of labour force.

In Luxembourg, the number of asylum seekers has increased since 2011, putting pressure on the national reception system and its scattered reception centres. New sites for reception were therefore developed in cooperation with local stakeholders. However, while local governments mainly agreed with the allocation of the centres, the public opinion was sometimes divergent. This has contributed to a notion that some cities were more welcoming to refugees than others. For example, in 2015, four sites in four municipalities were selected by the gov-

ernment for the building of additional centres, in the form of container villages. One of the container villages was envisaged to be in Steinfort – a town of 5,000 inhabitants – close to the Belgian border. The location was on state-owned territory originally intended for the enlargement of a Park-and-Ride facility. The state decision to accommodate up to 300 residents in the container village (with the possibility of increasing it to 600 if needed) was discussed with the mayor. The latter was not entirely positive about it, but eventually accepted the provisional reception facility. The concept was to have a fully equipped village with modular houses, a school, a restaurant, etc.<sup>4)</sup> To accelerate the procedure, the government decided to take the planning responsibility for this area away from the municipality, and have a state-based, top-down planning procedure (POS, *plan d'occupation du sol*). The large number of asylum seekers who would be accommodated in this place, as well as the top-down procedure, led to negative reactions, such as a citizens' initiative named "*Keen Containerduerf am Duerf*" ("No container village in the village"). The initiative was arguing that the opening of the facility should be halted as not enough staff would be available, language barriers would exist between the asylum seekers and the residents, but it also mentioned potential environmental problems.<sup>5)</sup> A 'not-in-my-backyard' reaction developed in part of the population, especially for those who feared a potential loss in the value of their properties.<sup>6)</sup> In 2016, the municipal council opted for a new solution, i.e. to have only 100 asylum seekers accommodated within the existing housing stock of the municipality. Due to the high cost, this proposition was however not accepted by the government.<sup>7)</sup> The same year, the government approved – without consulting the mayor or the citizens – a new regulation to turn the POS into a legal framework. This would have allowed the government to build the container village. However, even-

4) "Drei Container-Dörfer bis Mitte 2016", *Lëtzebuurger Journal*, 16 September 2015; "Eine totale Ausnahmesituation", *Luxemburger Wort*, 22 September 2015; "Luxemburg bereitet sich vor", *Tageblatt*, 23 September 2015

5) "Flüchtlingswelle: Gemeinsam ist es zu schaffen", *Luxemburger Wort*, 26 September 2015; "Willkommen, nur woanders", *Tageblatt*, 07 November 2015; "Accueil des réfugiés: foutues chauves-souris", *Woxx*, 22 September 2016.

6) "Nicht alle haben Angst", *Tageblatt*, 17 December 2015.

7) "Ja, aber bitte nur 100 Flüchtlinge", *Luxemburger Wort*, 27 February 2016.

tually some residents – some of them members of the *Keen Containerduerf am Duerf* initiative – appealed to the administrative court. The court ruled against the building of the container village, arguing that a strategic environment assessment was missing.<sup>8)</sup> A year later, the issue was debated in the framework of the municipal elections, which led to a change of mayor. The new mayor positioned himself in favour of the container village, which has however not been built to date. This case study in Luxembourg illustrates how a small part of the population was able to hinder the construction of the facility and the plan of the national government, while the successive mayors and the majority of the population were rather in favour of it.<sup>9)</sup>

From 2015 onwards, Dutch municipalities have been made responsible for policies pertaining to welfare, work and income. Within this context, the city of Utrecht carved out considerable autonomy vis-à-vis the centralized national policies. It has already been refusing to implement the rigid governmental policies towards rejected asylum seekers for years, considering them ill-informed and unproductive (Kos et al. 2016). At present, the city runs a housing facility (the Einstein Project)<sup>10)</sup> for young people, the occupancy of which is carefully balanced between asylum seekers, accepted refugees and locals. The city identifies several advantages in doing so. It saves asylum seekers from being moved between AZCs and immediately allows them to develop local roots. Secondly, by offering housing to local young people, the local acceptance of the resettlement of refugees (which occasionally has been very contentious) is very high.<sup>11)</sup> In order to secure funding for this project, direct access was gained to EU funds (Urban Innovative Actions), i.e. bypassing the national government.

The city of Amsterdam invited the COA to house asylum seekers in the city. Furthermore, it promotes the ‘Amsterdam Approach’. This is a tailor-made integration trajectory for each refugee. The city has appointed seventy case managers who, together with job hunters, income consultants and the NGO Dutch Council for Refugees, indi-

vidually coach people from the moment they have been granted a residence status. Their support is meant to be available for the first three years and be based on an individual action plan. Part of this plan is an assessment of the individual’s capacities, education, professional background and experience and should lead to education, employment or both. The latter is important in the Dutch context due to conflicting national policy goals. All municipalities are obliged by law to help integrate refugees (and other migrants). This is done by means of mandatory Declaration of Participation, which newcomers have to sign. In preparation, municipalities offer some form of training, its extent and contents being at their discretion. Ensuring ‘participation’ furthermore aims to reduce welfare dependency (this follows from the Participation Law and covers all inhabitants). At the same time, refugees are expected to fulfil their obligations under the Civil Integration Act. Essentially this means passing an integration examination within three years of arrival. As RAZENBERG and DE GRUIJTER (2017) note, municipal interpretations of what this implies differ. About half the municipalities prioritize employment of any kind and regardless of available skills. RAZENBERG and DE GRUIJTER (2017) found examples of municipalities which expect highly skilled refugees to work full-time in the local greenhouses, thus making it very difficult for them to find the time to prepare for the civic integration exam. In the other half, emphasis is on education towards passing the integration exam quickly. This may mean refugees are exempted from the regularly imposed obligation to look for and accept any suitable employment. And so the Amsterdam Approach calls for a smart mix, taking account of labour market needs and the ambitions of the refugee.<sup>12)</sup> At the same time, the city is actively engaged at the European level as the coordinator of the Urban Agenda for the EU’s Partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees. This partnership aims to horizontally organize (with a number of other cities) activities (such as a European migrant advisory board) aimed at the integration of migrants and refugees.<sup>13)</sup>

<sup>8)</sup> “Streit geht in die nächste Runde”, Luxemburger Wort, 13 September 2016.

<sup>9)</sup> “Totgesagte leben länger”, Luxemburger Wort, 14 October 2017.

<sup>10)</sup> <https://plan-einstein.nl/>

<sup>11)</sup> Based on conversations with Utrecht’s policy advisors responsible for refugee integration.

<sup>12)</sup> Communications with the city of Amsterdam’s responsible policy advisor and taken from OECD 2018.

<sup>13)</sup> <https://www.amsterdam.nl/bestuur-organisatie/organisatie/ruimte-economie/amsterdam-and-europe/news/newletter-april-2018/urban-agenda-cu/>

#### 4 Discussion of convergences and divergences

The local case studies from Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands show some significant variations on the horizontal as well as the vertical levels, within and between the countries being studied, but also some convergences.

In all case study countries, the reception system is multilevel. The legislative process takes place at the European and national levels, while the local level is involved in the implementation in practice, but not in the decision-making. The local actor constellations and discourses which frame the allocation of asylum seekers thus nevertheless play an important role in refugee reception. However, in each case, the multilevel system functions in a different way.

While in Germany, the federal structure imposes an important subnational level with considerable influence on the county level regarding the allocation of asylum seekers, Luxembourg and the Netherlands have a more centralized state structure with direct links between the state and municipal levels. In all three countries, the processing of asylum applications is nationally organized, while the accommodation and integration measures differ. In Germany and the Netherlands, after the initial reception stage, it is delegated to the municipal level, while in Luxembourg, the central state stays in charge of accommodation for asylum seekers throughout the time during which their applications are processed, through partial delegation to the NGO sector. Only once asylum seekers have been granted status do municipalities start to have a more direct involvement, e.g. through the provision of social services or housing. However, there are no housing schemes which asylum seekers can automatically benefit from, and some end up having to stay in the reception facilities for longer periods. Moreover, we can see further considerable divergence of reception regimes: in Germany, the idea of fair burden sharing can be found on all relevant levels, down to the municipal level. Municipalities are obliged to offer accommodation to the county administration, which they find either in municipal housing, via cooperation with private landlords, or by installing emergency shelters. In case of non-compliance, county governments can enforce allocation of asylum seekers. The implementation of integration measures is organized within the established structures of social support. This also applies to social housing of people who have refugee status. Civil society

actors play a strong role in the integration process, either by offering support to asylum seekers and municipal actors, or by practising resistance to the allocation of asylum seekers.

In Luxembourg, the municipalities are officially not involved in the reception process, and there is no automatic and mandatory distribution key. They have however an indirect role (e.g. through the schooling of children). There is a considerable level of flexibility in the opening and closing of facilities, according to need. As in the German local cases, civil society and the question of how asylum reception is framed on the local level play a major role in the development of reception patterns.

In the Netherlands, traditionally the role of local government in refugee reception was limited to their dialogue with COA, as to whether or not to accept a reception centre, and of which size. This changed from 2015 when a) the government devolved welfare policies to the municipalities and b) the numbers of asylum seekers rose dramatically. The implementation of laws pertaining to integration (mandatory exams, employment, and Declaration of Participation) are now all local affairs, diversifying the integration chances of refugees. Municipalities, notably the larger cities, embrace this as an opportunity for tailor-made integration, expecting better outcomes. Thus, as in the German and Luxembourgish case studies, local stakeholders and civil society create specific local responses to asylum seekers.

Discussing the governance style and its impact on the practical outcomes, in all three countries we can see a top-down procedure (e.g. through the idea of a fair shares in terms of population and economic structure or availability of sites/accommodation) which to some extent at least leaves out the civic sphere as well as further considerations regarding long-term integration. Both issues are relevant for local governance strategies, and notwithstanding comparable governance frameworks, we can find considerable divergence on the horizontal level of comparison regarding the implementation and communication of refugee reception policies. While in the German case of Biberach as well as in the Dutch case of Utrecht, we can see how a positive framing of refugee reception, combined with the communication of best-practice measures, can positively influence the public opinion, the German case of Nossen and the Luxembourgish case of Steinfort both show a high level of polarization of public opinion triggered by top-down approaches of policy-making.

## 5 Conclusion

The central aim of this local-to-local comparison was to identify the reason for varying approaches and outcomes regarding refugee reception, taking the national level as one but not the only framing feature for this development. We now draw some conclusions and develop suggestions regarding the further fine-tuning of a multilevel research framework, and practical implications regarding refugee reception processes, focusing on 1) the role of local populations, 2) the role of local stakeholders and 3) the role of national policies and approaches towards migration, integration and refugee reception.

- 1) Regarding the role of local populations, based on our findings, we argue that on this level of governance, the local population appears as an important actor in the governance of reception. The findings suggest that a top-down implementation of asylum reception can create numerous problems on the ground, as it can trigger protest among the locals because they have not been sufficiently involved in the decision. Therefore, for the sake of good local governance, integration processes might be more likely to be successful if they start right at the arrival of asylum seekers, and asylum seekers as well as local populations have to be informed and prepared for the arrival. It seems as if a NIMBY reaction can only be avoided when allocation is well prepared in practical terms, for example by respecting local habits, conditions, and discourses, and by installing a good communication basis with the local population prior to the arrival of asylum seekers. Comparing the local cases in Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, exclusionary and large compounds tend to be rejected by the local population, while medium and small-scale allocation combined with integration measures are better accepted. Also, as the Dutch example shows, asylum reception strategies which also envisage measures for the local population can cause a positive and integrative reception atmosphere. Regarding implications for research concepts on refugee reception within a multilevel governance frame, we argue that not only public opinion on the national level, but local discourses and practices (citizen initiatives for or against the allocation of asylum seekers) have to be integrated into the research frame.
- 2) Regarding the role of local stakeholders, it is necessary to highlight the fact that on the local level, the issue of asylum seeker reception is discussed within the same framing as other issues at stake, such as labour force shortages, social housing, or local infrastructure. While on the EU/national and sub-national levels, discussions about distribution of asylum seekers follow quantitative criteria and distribution keys, at the local level the relational question is framed not only by quantitative indicators but by perceptions of the effects of asylum seekers' accommodation on local development. Research concepts and policy approaches dealing with refugee reception therefore need to integrate socioeconomic, political and demographic aspects, local development strategies, as well as local discourses and past experience of migration and integration processes. Regarding governance in the context of increased arrivals, such as in 2014/15, local strategies could build on past experience with change management in the context of external impact and try to create a positive narrative linked to social innovation or labour market development which could be triggered by the integration efforts.
- 3) National policies and approaches towards migration, integration and refugee reception prepare the ground for welcoming or anti-immigrant discourses. They have to be perceived as important framing features for understanding the development of local discourses and policies. The Dutch case studies in particular have shown that state and local policies regarding integration can develop in different directions. While the nation state sticks with exclusionary policies until the decision on the asylum application has been taken, municipalities are developing individual approaches, aiming to harmonize asylum seeker reception with other local policy fields, and avoiding the limbo situation for asylum seekers during the asylum procedure with regard to integration measures. This also holds true for rejected asylum seekers, as they stay on the municipal territory, and thus their physical presence and their vital needs cannot be ignored, regardless of diverging national policies.

The findings in our case studies highlight the individual agency of institutionalized state and non-state actors, as well as of civil society, local actors and the asylum seekers themselves (e.g. BELLONI 2016; DARLING 2016). Even though they are based

on the CEAS, our findings clearly show the impact of national and local reception regimes, as well as of agency, leading to different reception settings. The case studies show especially that even within the same national setting, local reception regimes and actor constellations can shape divergent reception outcomes. This underlines the importance of the local turn and the approach of a local-to-local comparison.

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