

Exploring volunteers' perspectives on integration processes of asylum seekers in rural areas

Abstract

This research explores how citizen initiatives contribute to the integration process of asylum seekers. It takes the perspective of volunteers in citizen initiatives in rural villages in the municipality of Het Hogeland. Literature on cultural-religious aspects of integration, particularly the development of social networks and relationships which highlighted a two-way integration process. However, studies on volunteers' experiences are limited, making this research a valuable contribution to current research. Semi-structured interviews with volunteers near asylum seeker centers (AZC) in Winsum and Uithuizen were conducted to explore integration experiences. Main findings in this study were that the rural setting did not significantly impact integration opportunities. Further, social contact and purposeful activities support asylum seekers' sense of belonging and well-being. Moreover, in cases of sustainable contact between asylum seekers and volunteers increases future integration opportunities. Future research could focus on the organization of citizen initiatives and the inclusion of formal institutions like the municipality and COA or focus on locations with a larger distance between a rural area and the nearest city.

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Introduction

Asylum seekers often face negative stigmas, amplified by media and societal attitudes. Arrivals are frequently portrayed as exploiting the welfare state by accessing housing, healthcare, and employment (Bakker, Cheung, and Phillimore, 2016). Consequently, a societal discourse emerges that suggests failed attempts at integration. For this reason, integration remains a debated topic in the Netherlands (Damen et al., 2022), highlighting the so-called rise of the refugee crisis (Grip, 2019). Therefore, increased attention should be given to helping asylum seekers integrate quickly, comfortably, and functionally to avoid social exclusion and support their active participation in society (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2016). Successful integration involves a multidimensional approach of integration, focusing on a sense of belonging, social bonds, feeling at home, and cultural knowledge. The importance of the place, local people, and practices increases as local resources are distributed to new refugees (Grip, 2019).

Upon arrival at the Asylum Seeker Center (AZC), asylum seekers wait for a decision on their asylum request, which can take up to a year or more. During this waiting period, they live under the strict control of the AZC with limited access to the labor market and social security. Asylum seekers are not expected to begin the official integration process, and if their request is denied, they must leave the country within 28 days (Bakker, Cheung, and Phillimore, 2016). These conditions increase feelings of uncertainty and negatively impact psychological health, causing many asylum seekers to struggle to fill their days meaningfully and may resort to destructive activities (Dupont et al., 2005).

Consequently, rural areas are characterized by different types of reception (McAreevey and Argent, 2018). Factors like geographical location, population density, socioeconomic conditions, and the community's history and culture strongly influence how asylum seekers are received. For this reason, asylum seekers' experiences can differ significantly in rural communities from those in urban areas. Common challenges include the inability to offer specialized support, limited access to services, and mobility constraints (Patuzzi, Andriescu, and Pietropolli, 2020). However, the smaller size of services and a higher degree of informality, flexibility, and personalized support in rural areas can lead to better integration (Turid Sætermo and Guro Korsnes Kristensen, 2023).

Integration policy in the Netherlands is highly decentralized, making asylum seekers heavily reliant on local policies (Damen et al., 2022). These policies often focus on measurable aspects such as neglecting asylum seekers and their relationship with the host society (Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx, 2016). As a result, cultural and religious aspects go unnoticed as they relate to differences between the host society and asylum seekers (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten, 2017). Local initiatives, set up by residents, focus on changing relationships and increasing interactions between the asylum seekers and the host society and therefore become important (Kappa, 2018). However, integration policy puts little emphasis on local initiatives, which concurrently become more important while asylum seekers reside in the AZC (Zapata-Barrero, Caponio, and Scholten, 2017).

Research problem

Within the context of the integration process of asylum seekers living in AZC's in the municipality of het Hogeland in the Netherlands, this paper aims to understand the importance of citizen initiatives affecting the integration process of refugees in rural communities. This leads to the following main research question: *How do volunteers in local citizen initiatives support the integration process of asylum seekers perceive their roles in rural areas in the municipality of het Hogeland?*

The following sub-question will support the main research question:

- *How does the concept of belonging relate to the integration process in rural communities?*

Structure of the thesis

In the following chapters, a review of the literature will be provided, followed by a description of the methodology. Based on the results an analysis will be done based on the earlier defined literature. The discussion and conclusion will provide key findings in the context of the previous chapters, that will guide propositions of future research.

Theoretical framework

Conceptualizing Integration

Integration of asylum seekers and refugees has been a well-studied subject for the last few decades, yet the scientific community has not reached a consensus on its definition. Various definitions using different factors have been conceptualized. Building on terms such as common cultural life, inclusion in social and economic systems to social inclusion and acceptance. In this section, the focus will be on the concept of integration in the context of migrants. The term migrants is a broad term involving people migrating to another country. Asylum seekers and refugees are a specific category of migrants which will be explained later, however, whenever migrants are discussed the perspective of asylum seekers and refugees should be taken into account. To continue, the term Integration involves a process relating to the settlement of migrants who interact with the host society, leading to various changes in the community (Phillimore, 2020). Despite differing definitions, agreement has been found on the view that integration builds on a division between insiders and outsiders. Insiders in this case can be viewed as a cluster demarcated by political as well as social borders and outsiders enter this cluster (Grip, 2019). The formulation and goals of integration can differ greatly across countries. Therefore, acknowledging that there is a high variability leading to multiple pathways of achieved integration is important (Crul and Schneider, 2010). For this reason, integration is difficult to define but is most commonly understood as a dynamic, multidimensional, and multi-directional process, shaped within time, place, and context (Damen et al., 2022).

Policy documents emphasize the importance of interaction between multiple parties, highlighting the reciprocity role of the host society in a two-way process of accommodation (Phillimore, 2020). In practice, however, integration strategies are often one-sided, requiring asylum seekers to adapt. Policymakers focus primarily on functional dimensions like education, employment, health, and housing, as participation in these dimensions provides access to other parts of society (Bakker, Cheung, and Phillimore, 2016). Consequently, successful integration is measured by participation in these dimensions (Grip, 2019; Phillimore, 2020). However, social aspects beyond these quantitative measures are less incorporated into policies, failing to capture the full multidimensional nature of integration (Bakker, Cheung, and Phillimore, 2016). More precisely, the asylum seeker itself and its quantitative measures should be less emphasized, but instead the relationship with the host society. The cultural-religious dimension involves migrants, particularly their perceptions and reactions to differences and diversity between themselves and the host society. Therefore, the cultural-religious dimension involves information quantitative measures cannot capture and is found in the common denominator being the change in relationships and making the interactional nature of the integration process visible (Garcés-Mascareñas and Penninx, 2016).

Social networks

The multidimensionality of the cultural-religious dimension discussed earlier, various concepts have been correlated to integration to provide context (Hiitola and Vähä-Savo, 2021). Social networks of asylum seekers have a significant role in the integration process, creating a foundation of connectedness that fosters conditions in the host society. Improvements have been identified in a sense of identity and confidence, alleviating feelings of isolation during the integration process (Beirens et al., 2007). According to Allen et al. (2021), three different forms of social relationships and networks have been identified: bonds, bridges, and links. Social bonds are relationships with a strong connection between people sharing the same ethnicity, religion, and nationality. Most social bonds are family and strong friendships sharing practical and emotional support. Social bridges include connections with people from different backgrounds, characterized by a lower level of trust than social bonds. They occur when a person has opportunities to interact with others through activities that are beneficial for both the asylum seeker and the host society. Social bridges are more inclusive because they create broader social networks and may arise from exchanging resources and an interconnectedness of class, race, religion, and sociodemographic characteristics. Lastly, social links are connections with local and government institutions that enable access to rights and services (Ager and Strang, 2004). Interpersonal contact, social inclusion, and cultural knowledge can greatly increase by promoting the development of social networks. Whether these interactions develop positively or negatively depends on the degree to which social distances are overcome within the community (Kappa, 2018).

Belonging

The previous paragraph discussed that social networks support interactions between the local community and asylum seekers, which also relates to a sense of belonging. Belonging can be identified as feeling at home, a feeling of safety, and having the ability to develop an identity to one's liking (Huizinga and van Hoven, 2018). Furthermore, belonging refers to emotional experiences as well as the relationship between people and places. According to Herslund (2021), belonging is associated with social norms and structures of everyday life and defines acceptance in the local context. Meaning, that how well an asylum seeker can relate to these social norms and structures defines the experiences and connections that can be created in the community. Belonging therefore is a dynamic process between the asylum seeker and the community and depends on various interrelated components of the social system. Supporting elements of this dynamic process are the competencies of asylum seekers as well as the host community. Competencies relate to skills and abilities needed to connect with differences in social norms developing into respect for cultural values and differences. Opportunities to utilize competencies in meeting places are critical to allow a person to create a relationship with the host community (Allen et al., 2021). Relationships in this context can range from strangers to close family and friends. Generally, asylum seekers report their highest trust in family members. In other cases, strong relationships were built with friends from the country of origin relating to social bonds. On the contrary, some relationships developed through sharing the same religion with members of the host community relating to social bridges (Strang and Quinn, 2019).

Belonging thus relates to lived experiences and the ability to share these experiences in the host communities through different kinds of relationships (Lindegaard Moensted, 2020). Additionally, migrants develop their own new spaces in society that are related to their sense of home, practically expressed through places like specific supermarkets or mosques. These places represent traditions, norms, and values from their country of origin increasing a sense of belonging (Huizinga and van Hoven, 2018).

The situation of asylum seekers

Refugees are considered a specific type of migrant group since they are considered a person who is outside their country of origin and unable or unwilling to return due to persecution. The integration of refugees in the host country is dependent on the governmental policies and conditions of the labor market. In the Netherlands, refugees obtain the legal status of asylum seekers. While they await for a decision to be made regarding their asylum request they reside in Asylum Seekers Centers (AZC). In AZC's life is tightly controlled, access to the labor market is limited and adults have limited access to education or social security. Furthermore, in rural areas access to facilities is limited and AZC's are often located at the border of a village. Under such circumstances, there is a higher chance of social exclusion as the asylum seekers are physically excluded from the host society (Bakker, Cheung and Phillimore, 2016). Formally, the decision to obtain refugee status can take up to six months, however, in practice, this norm is often exceeded by another six months or more (Bakker, 2016). The process of obtaining refugee status is identified with a period of uncertainty and can have a significant impact on asylum seekers' psychological health. The long waiting periods with severe restrictions, insecurity, and boredom contribute to asylum seekers not being able to give meaning to their days (Dupont et al., 2005). As a result, citizen initiatives have stepped in to support social aspects of integration. The initiatives organize cultural encounters based on differences and promote understanding among participants. Social relations in this setting are the most important for feeling a sense of belonging in the host society. Citizen initiatives focussing on asylum seekers have been correlated with a positive discourse, however, no clear distinction has been made on how citizen initiatives contribute to integration. Arguments have been that the change in the relationship between the local community and the asylum seekers is the most important predictor, emphasizing interactional processes (Kappa, 2018).

Rural communities

The previous two paragraphs highlight that asylum seekers in rural areas need support in a way to promote sustainable everyday life (Herslund, 2021). Focus on the local context can create a setting that sustains rural integration and community-oriented approaches. The community in this regard is important because the receptibility of the community influences the extent to which social networks can form with the asylum seekers (Sætermo and Kristensen, 2023). Two discourses are identified in rural communities. Firstly, a higher proportion of negative views towards asylum seekers have been correlated with rural communities compared to urban areas. Communities in rural areas can push a process of integration that goes against traditional rural values, expressed through economic and social expectations related to feelings of otherness. In this case, local communities feel the need to protect their sense of rural idyll (Glorius, Bürer and

Schneider, 2021), stemming from a low degree of diversity and a high degree of social control (Glorius et al., 2020). Secondly, rural communities subjected to a history of integrating migrants have shown to be more receptive and have a higher degree of social inclusion. Everyday encounters might give the local community opportunities to reflect on their perceived differences, highlighting the necessity of meeting places (Glorius, Bürer and Schneider, 2021). The absence of services and public transport options limits the ability to assist asylum seekers with special needs that are reinforced by mobility constraints contributing to feelings of isolation (Patuzzi, Andriescu and Pietropolli, 2020).

Nevertheless, the allocation of asylum seekers to rural communities could benefit growth and development by reversing population decline. (Glorius et al., 2020). Further, rural communities are associated with a good place to live, with idyllic aspects of rural life being portrayed as a tight-knit community with less stress, nature, and lower living costs. The rural community can therefore be described as dynamic, progressive, and future-oriented (Turid Sætermo and Guro Korsnes Kristensen, 2023). Rural communities have a higher degree of social security, self-organization, and volunteering, increasing the number of social contacts. There has been a significant increase in organizing activities, playing a role in an increased level of activity of local communities referring to the capacity of resilience of rural communities. Community associations and churches can function as mediators between the local community and the asylum seekers and have been shown to increase a sense of belonging (Herslund, 2021). Consequently, tight-knit communities may increase refugees' opportunities for strong interpersonal networks and social networks. The community in this case can be a catalyst for learning the local language, allowing quicker exchanges of information, and a flexible approach to mobilize resources. Asylum seekers may feel closer to the local community due to receiving direct personal support (Patuzzi, Andriescu and Pietropolli, 2020).

Conceptual model

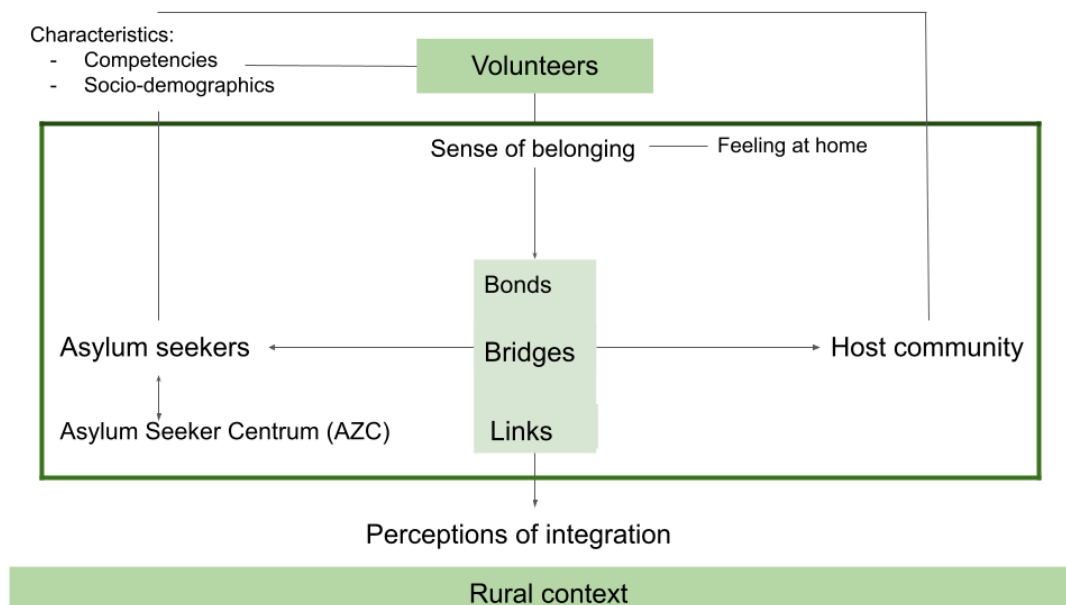


Figure 1: conceptual model

The conceptual model is derived from the theoretical framework and takes the rural context as a base of the research. Volunteers contribute to the development of a sense of belonging which is related to feeling at home. Consequently, the degree to which a sense of belonging is created and received depends on whether a bond, bridge, or link is formed between the asylum seekers and the host community. Volunteers are the catalysts in providing opportunities for contact between the asylum seekers and the host community. Asylum seekers are dependent on the rules and regulations of the Asylum Seeker Centrum (AZC) and are therefore influenced in the way they can create relationships. The asylum seekers, volunteers, and host community all possess a certain amount of characteristics influencing interactions. The combination of these processes influences perceptions of integration.

Methodology

Type of Research

The choice for a qualitative approach was made due to the complex and evolving nature of integration processes embedded in the local context and personal experiences. Therefore, qualitative research is used to explore personal insights and perceived discourses related to the integration process. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with volunteers were conducted to gather views, perceptions, and experiences of the integration process in rural communities in the Netherlands. This method allowed participants to share detailed insights and contextualize this specific case. Hence the main source of this research was interviews (Punch, 2014), each lasting 30-60 minutes. Interviews were conducted until a level of saturation was reached, resulting in ten interviews. They were held at locations convenient and comfortable for the participants, mostly in their homes. For a few cases, a bar or an online interview suited the participant better. The interview guide was used to conduct interviews that ensured key questions were addressed while allowing flexibility to adapt to participants' inputs. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their insights and perspectives during the interview.

Sampling

Participants were selected based on criteria aligning with the research purpose (Punch, 2014). The participants selected in this research had a Dutch nationality and identified themselves as part of the local community. Participants lived in or near the villages of Winsum and Uithuizen in the municipality of het Hogeland. Additionally, participants had to be informally involved with an Asylum Seekers Center (AZC) and were not chosen based on age, gender, religion, or education level. Purposive sampling was used initially, utilizing the Internet to find initial contacts. Subsequently, snowball sampling was used utilizing the local network to gather more participants (Punch, 2014).

Positionality

Before the research, I was not familiar with AZC locations or with people who have a refugee background. I had no particular notions or expectations of how their life here in the Netherlands impacted me. Certain political discourses may contribute to negative stigmas towards asylum seekers, but I have never experienced those in my personal life. During my research, I have been reflecting on my perception of asylum seekers and have been thinking about the vulnerability of asylum seekers and their experiences in new societies.

Interview guide

Based on the concepts from the theology an interview guide was developed (Appendix C). Topics covered in the interviews included: the role of participants, the situation of asylum seekers, the contribution of volunteer work, feelings of home, the community, and the rural area. The background of the participants was considered to be important to get a broader understanding of the participants' views and perceptions on integration. A test interview was

conducted to ensure the guide's correctness, leading to its revision and finalization. All interviews were conducted and recorded by the same researcher after obtaining signed consent from participants (Appendix A). Due to technical difficulties, two interviews were not recorded. The recorded interviews were transcribed and the anonymity of the participants was secured by transforming the data into a verbatim data transcription (Punch,2014). To establish a systematic analysis the data was coded based on an inductive approach that emerged from the participants' data, offering deeper insights into the research's interrelated relationships (Punch, 2014). After ten interviews were coded, patterns could be analyzed, identifying patterns of similarities and differences between the answers given in the interviews. All interviews were done in Dutch, therefore the consent form as well as the interview guide were translated to Dutch (Appendix B & D). Atlas.ti was used to code and analyze data.

Ethical Considerations

The GDPR was leading during the process of the research to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of participants(The European Parliament And The Council Of The European Union, 2016). Participants were informed about the research process through a consent form (Appendix B), in which the participants' rights during the research process were clearly stated. The participants had the right to control the disclosure of information given during the research process and could withdraw whenever the participant wanted. Ensuring the well-being of the participant was prioritized by focusing on integrity. Anonymization of the participants was realized by deleting personal information by leaving out names, job titles, places related to participants' personal lives, and detailed events. Anonymity was the goal while analyzing the data, and non-traceability was granted in all cases (Punch, 2014). Personal data was only used when it contributed to the goal of the research.

Characteristics of participants

The primary objective of this research was to gain insights into volunteers' perspectives on the integration of asylum seekers in rural villages. As shown in Table 1, all participants have lived in or near the researched villages for a significant time. What stood out was that most participants identified as Christians even though participants were not selected based on their religion. As a result, there has been more emphasis on religion and the corresponding motivations to be a volunteer in this research though this was not a specific interest of this research. Multiple participants had backgrounds in healthcare or education, while others had experience in different sectors. An important notion was that several participants had positive previous encounters with foreign cultures before participants decided to volunteer for citizen initiatives. Furthermore, most participants were retired at the time of the interviews and served roles as buddies to asylum seekers or provided other activities.

Participant	Role	(Previous) work sector	Belief	Time in village
Getrude	Buddy	Healthcare	Christianity	23 years
Sita	Buddy	Multiple including healthcare	Christianity	3 years
Roelof	Buddy	Healthcare	Humanism	24 years
Bart	Workshop	Creative	Christianity	11 years
Charlotte	Buddy and workshop	Healthcare	Christianity	40 years
Henrika	Buddy	Healthcare	Humanism	24 years
Coralie	Activities	Education	Christianity	53 years
Gustav	Buddy	Construction	Christianity	68 years
Fokke	Organizational	Other	Christianity	40 years
Tineke	Organizational	Business owner	Christianity	12 years

Table 1: Characteristics of participants

Results

To answer the main research question, "*How can local initiatives contribute to the integration process of asylum seekers focussing on the perspective of volunteers in rural areas in the municipality of Het Hogeland?*", participants were first asked about their roles in the local initiative. Accordingly, participants were notified about one initiative through a local newsletter and attended an informational meeting where they could sign up for various roles, such as a buddy or leading workshops. Workshops were given during events like Christmas or for activities like making candles or art. Most participants served as buddies, acting as community contacts for asylum seekers. During the informational meeting, buddies could give preferences for the kind of contact they would like to provide. This was an opportunity to improve the matching between the buddy and the participant. Some buddies had no preferences whereas other participants liked a family or a single person better. Initial contact was facilitated by a formal institution Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers (COA), with subsequent interactions arranged voluntarily between the buddy and the asylum seeker. Other initiatives were organized within churches in both villages. Often the church collaborated with the previously mentioned citizen initiative and other institutions like the primary school, sports clubs, and other churches. An example of these activities was a present party during the Dutch holiday Sinterklaas or a balloon party to do activities with kids. In some cases formal institutions were involved, however, participants were in most cases not informed on formalities but rather the activity itself.

Motivations of participants

When participants were asked about their personal beliefs, most indicated they were Christian and attended church regularly. However, two participants mentioned they had no religious beliefs but were familiar with Christianity due to their upbringing. Despite these differences, participants shared similar values. Charlotte said that every person matters regardless of background, and Hendrika highlighted the importance of helping fellow human beings to contribute to societal progress.

"I think everyone matters. Every person is a person." (Charlotte)

Notably, multiple participants clearly said that they did not want to impose Christian beliefs on the asylum seekers because they knew the asylum seekers in question had other religious beliefs than them. Rather, differences were accepted and seen as aspects of individual lives that should not be altered.

"And yes, the whole core of the Christian message, I wouldn't want to impose that or anything." (Bart)

Still, conversations about religion occurred but only once a relationship developed between the participant and the asylum seeker. These conversations covered similarities and differences between religions and lifestyles. Often, conversations were initiated by examples meaning that if

asylum seekers wanted to pray at specific times, participants expressed interest. Similarly, conversations about Dutch religious days arose when such events were approaching, explaining their meaning and practicalities.

“There is nothing wrong with the message of Islam..... I think Islam is basically about being there for each other. That you have to take care of each other. Only the religious experience is a little different than we are used to. But if we had been born there, we would have done that and not this.” (Gustav)

Cultural differences

Participants generally did not encounter significant problems when asked about cultural differences and sometimes even saw them as positive. Described difficulties included missed appointments by asylum seekers and confusion over rules and regulations in Dutch society. Notable were differences in gender roles. For example, Getrude and Gustav never interacted with the wives of asylum seeker families, whereas Hendrika, Roelof and Sita gradually developed contact with wives gradually developed. Customaries relating to visitors and food were perceived both negatively and positively depending on the participant. Some participants found it impractical when lavish meals were prepared during their visits, disrupting their schedules. Other participants described these visits as welcoming and an encounter with a warm atmosphere and learned to appreciate the norms and values of other religions.

“You have to realize that there are cultural differences and that you can not expect people to adapt completely. Yes, that's just not possible, as much as you would like.” (Coralie)

Language barriers varied depending on whether asylum seekers could speak English or only their mother tongue, which was often the case. Despite these difficulties, conversations went well because of the usage of translation apps or an asylum seeker who could speak English well and served as an interpreter. Emphasis was often on the fact that the asylum seekers wanted to learn Dutch to interact with Dutch society.

The previous sections in the results could be an example of a two-sided process of integration focussing on a positive response of the community within cultural-religious aspects. Participants indicated that maintaining the asylum seekers' norms, values, and religion while concurrently working on ways to interact with the participants and therefore Dutch society contributed to the integration process. This shows that a two-sided approach focuses on the relationship between the host community and the asylum seekers in which differences and diversity present themselves just as Phillimore (2020) stated. What might have contributed to the development of the relationship is the participant and the asylum seeker accepting each other. Meaning that cultural and religious differences should not be changed but rather embraced. Moreover, language barriers were present in many cases but emphasis was placed on solutions rather than problems. This is in line with Kappa (2018) who states that interactions can develop both negatively or positively depending on what degree social distances can be overcome.

Social network

The development of relationships between participants and asylum seekers depended on the nature of the participant's role and their significance to the asylum seeker. When the limited time was spent together or significant differences arose, relationships remained shallow. However, with substantial time spent together and mutually perceived as valuable, relationships developed as they got to know each other better. In such cases, contact often continued even after the asylum seeker left the AZC. On the contrary, when asylum seeker families stayed in the AZC for only a short period, not enough time was spent to develop a relationship, the focus in these cases was more on practicalities. In these instances, contact typically ended after the asylum seeker moved to a permanent residence.

Furthermore, the role of the participant influenced the nature of the relationship. Participants who provided workshops or activities interacted with asylum seekers for shorter periods, yet these encounters were still valued by both the participant and asylum seekers. For example, a participant who led art workshops described a joyful atmosphere among both children and adults. Another participant noted that engaging with asylum seekers and showing interest was a valuable part of activities.

Participants who were buddies often spent more time with their assigned asylum seekers or family, usually resulting in prolonged relationships and the development of social bridges. Important to note was that none of the participants expressed a desire to change the asylum seekers. Rather, importance was put on supporting their culture, fostering social contact, and addressing practical needs like introducing them to the region or assisting with medical care and moving. For example, Gustav organized a cycling trip to introduce the asylum seeker to the environment, while Sita regularly visited the AZC for coffee and tea. During these activities, lighthearted conversations often occurred. In some cases, conversations about differences in cultures and values took place, which were encouraged by both parties. Although participants mentioned having little difficult conversations about the past, they were aware of the challenges asylum seekers faced, such as leaving family behind or dealing with traumatic experiences. Consequently, contact often continued after the asylum seekers moved, with an emphasis on social interaction, learning Dutch, and integrating into society. Gertrude mentioned a less positive experience with a focus primarily on helping the asylum seeker family move and providing objects. Although Gertrude aimed to offer social contact and understand cultural differences, most contact focussed on involvement with arranging free furniture and renovating the house of the asylum seeker family. The emphasis on material assistance made it challenging to build a meaningful relationship, leading to a loss of contact with the asylum seeker family after the move. In this case, there were low levels of trust and few indications of the development of social bridges

At first, I was like I want to know when the children's birthday is for a card or a present. But no. I stopped. Eventually, we stopped having contact. (Gertrude)

Lastly, participants noted that asylum seekers made friends with others from the AZC or with individuals who shared similar backgrounds relating to social bonds. While contact with the Dutch community was less frequent, asylum seekers developed stronger connections with those of similar religions or backgrounds. For example, women in asylum-seeking families found it

challenging to connect with the Dutch community but still managed to build relationships with women from similar backgrounds.

The social network that is created within the community is an important concept in this research as stated by Allen et al (2021). All participants were part of the social network of an asylum seeker, with the most common social bond being a social bridge where the participant had the role of a buddy. These relationships were characterized by a combination of lighthearted and meaningful conversations, which allowed long-term friendships to develop.

Tightknit community

The small scale of the village was perceived in varying ways by participants. Some said that it did not contribute to the integration process, especially if they lived further away or lacked local contacts. Other participants said that the small scale was an important factor for integration. These participants had lived in the village for decades and had connections through their church or other volunteer work. This network facilitated an uncomplicated exchange of information to organize activities and provide help. For example, one participant mentioned the organization of a present celebration by the church in December. The organization in this case went smoothly because members of the church either wanted to volunteer, worked at formal organizations, or worked at the local primary school.

In our church was an initiative from someone who worked for a formal institution..... We as teachers organized the celebration with simple exercise games in which many children could participate (Coralie)

Additionally, participants said that greeting asylum seekers during daily activities and being friendly contributed to the well-being of the asylum seekers. For instance, one participant mentioned greeting asylum seekers while running errands. Similarly, another participant was approached by an asylum seeker with questions about their work and at another moment was invited to an asylum seeker's birthday party. Participants initiated contact out of interest in other cultures and a genuine curiosity about the asylum seekers's whereabouts.

I just saw a woman on a bench in a playground, but I had this interview so I had to go home. Otherwise, I would have walked up to her, that is what I like. (Charlotte)

In cases where participants provided activities or everyday encounters, there was a lower level of trust, however, yet they still contributed to feelings of connectedness within the community. This is in line with the concepts of Beirens et al. (2007) that focus on improvements in connection to foster a sense of identity and confidence to confront difficult feelings like isolation. Furthermore, participants mentioned wanting to help and organize activities in local churches as well as other local initiatives. If something needed to be arranged problems were resolved quickly because of the strong interpersonal networks due to volunteering for multiple organizations or having contacts within the area. This is in line with Patuzzi, Andriescu and Pietropolli (2020) who mention characteristics of the tight-knit community being a catalyst for the

quick exchange of information and a flexible approach as well as Herslund (2021) who mentions that rural communities have a higher degree of self-organization, volunteering and amount of social contact.

Rural area

The rural area in which the AZC was located was perceived as less significant by participants. Some viewed the location of the ACZ as remote from the village, whereas others mentioned that the AZC was built at a location where there was space at the time of construction. Therefore, distances to facilities and public transport were further away but within walking distance. Whenever an asylum seeker needed special care like a dentist or a hospital lack of services and distance were mentioned as negatively impacting the asylum seeker. Further, the condition within the AZC was mentioned as a common problem across multiple areas. Multiple participants mentioned the poignant conditions of the AZC with emphasis on the chilly atmosphere. This is partly in line with Patuzzi, Andriescu and Pietropolli (2020) who state that rural areas are correlated with an absence of services for special needs and mobility being limited. Important to add in this case is that mobility for everyday life is supported by well-connected bus and train connections, however in cases of emergencies in which a car is needed, mobility is limited. In these cases, buddies or COA assisted the asylum seeker

Belonging

To gain insight into the subquestion '*How does the concept of belonging relate to the integration process in rural communities?*' participants were asked about their perspectives relating to belonging. Participants had multiple perspectives on what helps asylum seekers feel at home, which can be categorized into two main discourses. The first discourse emphasizes the importance of hospitality, recognition, and friendliness. One participant correlated feeling at home with being involved and feeling important. Another participant highlighted that the whole environment, including store employees and residents, was crucial. The second discourse focuses on the need for meaningful activities, and offering more opportunities for work or other useful activities increasing responsibility for their well-being. Participants frequently mentioned that asylum seekers lacked purpose in their day-to-day activities and that the ability to work or do activities could enhance feelings of fitting into the new environment. For instance, Bart mentioned that an asylum seeker repaired bicycles, similar to his work in his home country. Gustav said that COA offers minimal support for the livelihoods of asylum seekers on both physical and emotional levels. Therefore, Gustav stepped in to fill the gaps that COA could not. For instance, he organized cycling trips for multiple asylum seekers and attempted to find employment for them once they were assigned a home. Additionally, Bart and Hendrika mentioned a store with specialty products or friends who resold such products from the city to be significant for asylum seekers.

According to Herslund (2021), belonging is associated with social norms and structures of everyday life and defines acceptance in the local context. Meaning, that how well an asylum seeker can relate to these social norms and structures defines the experiences and connections that can be created in the community. Belonging, therefore, is a dynamic process between the asylum seeker and the community and depends on various interrelated components of the

social system. Participants had different roles, mainly providing contact and activities. These activities assisted in creating connections between the participant and the asylum seeker. Over time, these connections could develop into social bridges, aiding in acceptance and the exchange of social norms and structures. Participants mentioned that friendliness and meaningful activities contributed to feelings of home. Therefore, these factors might predict whether a sense of belonging develops. However, the local community consists of multiple interrelated components which are difficult to predict and measure. Hence, no conclusion can be drawn.

Discussion and conclusion

A two-sided process of integration was highlighted through a positive focus on differences in norms, values, and religion between the participants and the asylum seekers. Developing a way to maintain contact with the asylum seekers was important to participants. The relationship between the participant and the asylum seeker was characterized by social bridges resulting in prolonged contact after the asylum seeker received refugee status and moved out of the Asylum Seeker Center. In this case, the exchange of interactions enabled the participant to expand on aspects of Dutch culture and lifestyle and concurrently enabled the asylum seeker to expand on their experiences and culture. Interactions without prolonged expectation such as workshops, activities organized by the church, and community interactions were often not characterized by social bridges. Still, these encounters allowed asylum seekers to provide activities that were characterized by a joyful atmosphere. Furthermore, everyday encounters between the community and the asylum seekers allowed for everyday encounters alleviating feelings of isolation. Strong interpersonal networks within the community allowed problems to be resolved quickly and information to be exchanged easily contributing to self-organization and volunteering. The rural area was perceived as less significant impact on asylum seekers according to participants. Distances to facilities and public transport were within walking distance and only in cases when the asylum seeker needed special care the rural area was perceived as lacking in facilities and mobility.

From the perspective of volunteers feelings of belonging are supported by social contact characterized by friendliness and meaningful activities that give purpose to day-to-day life while asylum seekers await a decision to be made regarding their asylum request. The temporary nature of the asylum seekers' stay may complicate feelings of home (Bakker, Cheung and Phillimore, 2016), but the support of volunteers was still perceived as positive. Some asylum seekers moved in proximity to the AZC whereas others moved to a different part of the country. Contact between the asylum seeker and the buddy was maintained in cases where a mutual relationship was built. Contact in these cases might have contributed to feelings of belonging, but this does not necessarily have to be related to the specific location of the AZC or the location the asylum seeker moved to. Rather the social bridge that was developed was important to participants. For this reason, initial contact may have provided an introduction to the new host society and continuation of sustainable contact might support the integration process of the asylum seeker long term. Activities provided opportunities for the asylum seekers to have contact with each other and the host community. These activities gave meaning to asylum seekers' days in a light-hearted manner.

Reflection

This research presents limitations as well as strong features. The research focused on perceptions of volunteers functioning in citizen initiatives. A strong feature is that this kind of perspective is often overlooked and therefore not represented in research. A negative feature is that because of the informal nature of the activities, participants are often less involved in formalities and more focused solely on providing the activity. As a result, participants could not

always answer questions to their full extent. Further, almost all participants did not know the difference between an asylum seeker and a refugee and mixed up the different terms. Despite there being big differences formally between the terms, participants often interacted with the asylum seekers or refugees because they wanted to assist them and not because they obtained a certain residence permit. Therefore, questions could have been improved to suit the participants and the research aim better. On the contrary, the informal nature of the research sheds light on the motivations and impacts volunteers can have despite not having active knowledge of integration processes. Another limitation is that the rural areas chosen in this research are still well connected to the nearest city, either by car, train, or bus. The location in Winsum was approximately 15 km away from the nearest city and the location of Uithuizen was approximately 30 km. Most participants in the research identified as Christians even though this was not part of the sampling strategy. Christian beliefs were a part of participants' lifestyles and therefore influenced the answers during the interview. Conducting interviews with participants without Christian beliefs could result in different answers giving different results.

Future research

Future research could focus on the organization of citizen initiatives and the inclusion of formal institutions like the municipality and COA. In this way, a broader perspective on integration processes can be identified with specific attention between people who obtained asylum and refugee status. Furthermore, ACZs in this research were still well-connected to cities. Future research therefore could focus on locations with a larger distance between a rural area and the nearest city, which is hard in the Netherlands due to its geographical features.

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Appendix A: Consent form (English)

Research project: “The ‘integration jungle’ experienced by the local community in relation to asylum seekers in the rural context”

I am Birgitte Rienstra a student at the University of Groningen, studying Human Geography and Planning. For my Bachelor Project, I am interested in how citizen initiatives contribute to the integration process of asylum seekers. More specifically, I am interested in the perceptions and experiences of people volunteering in activities in which asylum seekers are participating in rural contexts. Therefore I will analyze how the perceptions and experiences of volunteers contribute to the integration process of asylum seekers in relation to factors of the rural context. My research will result in a paper and a presentation. During this interview, we will be discussing your personal experiences. Your participation in this interview is voluntary, and we can end the interview at any time should any of the questions make you feel uncomfortable. Participation in this interview is anonymous therefore, your name and any other information that could reveal your identity will be changed to ensure anonymity. I and my supervisor will be the only person who can access the information provided today. After the interview, data will be stored on a university database and all raw data will be removed once the project is finished. If you agree, I would like to make an audio recording of this interview to make a transcript to further work with and reflect on the data provided. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. After the research, the participant will be notified about matters that could influence the participant in the research.

Do you have any questions concerning the process of the interview or the process after the interview has been conducted?

If you do not have any further questions and would like to participate in the interview, could you please sign the consent form?

Consent form for the research project: “The ‘integration jungle’ experienced by the local community in relation to asylum seekers in the rural context”

I have received sufficient information about the research, was able to ask questions, and my questions were answered to my satisfaction. I had enough time to decide to participate in the Research and my participation is completely voluntary. I can still withdraw during or after the interview, without the need for an explanation. I understand that I will remain anonymous and that information will only be used if it contributes to the research goal.

I am permitted to use the interview data for the following purposes:

1. Recording of the interview to obtain data
2. Using the provided data for the research paper and presentation.

I agree to participate in the interview
Name and signature of research participant

Date:

I declare that I have informed the research participant about the research.
Name and signature of researcher

Date:

Appendix B: Consent form (Dutch)

Onderzoeks project: “De integratie jungle” ervaren door de lokale gemeenschap in relatie tot asielzoekers in landelijke gebieden.

Ik ben Birgitte Rienstra, een student aan de Universiteit van Groningen waar ik Human Geography and Planning studeer. Ik ben geïnteresseerd in hoe lokale initiatieven bijdragen aan de integratie van asielzoekers. Specifiek focus ik op percepties en ervaringen van mensen die als vrijwilligerswerk doen voor activiteiten waarin asielzoekers deelnemen. Daarom zal ik analyseren hoe deze percepties en ervaringen bijdragen aan het integratie proces van asielzoekers in landelijke gebieden. Mijn onderzoek zal resulteren in een verslag en een presentatie waarin deze resultaten zullen worden gepresenteerd. Tijdens het interview zullen we persoonlijke ervaringen binnen dit onderwerp bespreken. Uw deelname tijdens dit onderzoek is vrijwillig, en we kunnen het interview beëindigen op elk moment mochten de vragen er voor zorgen dat u u niet meer op uw gemak voelt. Deelname aan het interview is anoniem en daarom zal uw naam en andere informatie en gegevens die uw identiteit kunnen onthullen. Ik en mijn begeleider zullen de enige personen zijn die toegang zullen hebben tot de informatie die vandaag is verstrekt. Na het interview zal data opgeslagen worden op een database van de universiteit, dat zal worden verwijderd zodra het project is afgerond. Als je toestemming geeft zou ik graag een opname willen maken van dit interview zodat ik een transcript kan maken om verder de data te kunnen analyseren. Het interview zal ongeveer 30-45 minuten duren. Wanneer het onderzoek is afgerond zal u op de hoogte gehouden worden van zaken die u zouden kunnen beïnvloeden als participant aan het onderzoek.

Heeft u vragen over het verloop van het interview of het proces nadat het interview is afgenomen?

Als u verder geen vragen heeft en wilt deelnemen aan het interview, zou u dan het toestemmingsformulier willen ondertekenen?

Toestemmingsformulier voor het onderzoeksproject: “De ‘integratiejungle’ die de lokale gemeenschap ervaart in relatie tot asielzoekers in de landelijke context”

Ik heb voldoende informatie gekregen over het onderzoek, heb vragen kunnen stellen en mijn vragen werden naar toebehoren beantwoord. Ik had genoeg tijd om te beslissen om deel te nemen aan het onderzoek en mijn deelname is geheel vrijwillig. Ik kan me nog steeds terugtrekken tijdens of na het interview, zonder dat er uitleg nodig is. Ik begrijp dat ik anoniem blijf en dat gegevens alleen worden gebruikt als deze bijdragen aan het onderzoeksdoel.

Ik heb toestemming gegeven om interviewgegevens gebruiken voor de volgende doeleinden:

1. Opname van het interview om data te verkrijgen
2. Gebruik van de aangeleverde gegevens voor het onderzoeksverslag en de presentatie.

Ik geef toestemming om deel te nemen aan het interview

Naam en handtekening van de participant

Datum:

Ik verklaar dat ik de participant voldoende geïnformeerd heb over het onderzoek.

Naam en handtekening van de onderzoeker

Datum:

Appendix C: Interview guide (English)

Introduction Questions:

- Can you share a bit about your background and what drew you to become involved in initiatives related to asylum seekers' integration in rural areas?
- How long have you been part of the community in [name of village] and what initially sparked your interest in participating in this initiative?
- Could you elaborate on how you first became engaged with this particular initiative and what motivated your involvement?

Activities: Can you provide an overview of your role and activities within the local citizen initiative aimed at supporting asylum seekers' integration

- What inspired or drove you to participate actively in these integration efforts?
- Could you discuss the individuals or groups you collaborate with within both the initiative and the broader community, including asylum seekers themselves?

Situation: How would you describe the current circumstances and challenges faced by asylum seekers in [name of village]? What are their prevailing concerns and needs?

- From your perspective, what factors contribute to the overall well-being and sense of security among asylum seekers in the village?

Connection and Belonging: In your opinion, what role do local citizen initiatives play in fostering a sense of belonging and facilitating the integration of asylum seekers into the community?

-
- Can you share instances where your interactions with asylum seekers have resulted in meaningful connections or relationships?
 - What made these interactions significant?
- How do you perceive the impact of your contributions on the integration journey of asylum seekers? What specific aspects of support do you believe are most beneficial to them?

Differences: How do you believe local citizen initiatives can leverage cultural diversity as an asset in promoting integration?

- Can you share any experiences or insights regarding cultural exchange or understanding?
- Have there been any notable challenges or obstacles arising from cultural differences within the context of the initiatives? How have you addressed or navigated these challenges?

Boundaries in Rural Context: From your perspective, what are the key limitations or constraints posed by the rural setting of [name of village] in terms of supporting asylum seekers' integration?

- How would you assess the availability and adequacy of facilities and resources for aiding integration efforts within the village?
- Do you perceive any unique mobility challenges faced by asylum seekers as a result of the rural context? If so, how do these challenges manifest?

Opportunities in Rural Context: In what ways do you see the rural setting of [name of village] offering distinct advantages or opportunities for tailoring integration approaches to individual needs?

- Do you believe the smaller scale of the village provides advantages for asylum seekers in terms of language acquisition and cultural adaptation? If so, how?

Appendix D: Interview guide translated to Dutch

Introductie (vertaalde vragen)

- Hoe ben je betrokken geraakt bij het vrijwilligers werk wat je nu doet?
- Kun je iets delen over je achtergrond en wat je drijft om betrokken te zijn bij een initiatief gerelateerd aan asielzoekers?
- Hoe lang heb je nu gewoond in Uithuizen en hoe heb je dat ervaren in relatie met je vrijwilligerswerk?

Activiteiten: Kun je vertellen over je rol binnen het vrijwillige initiatief?

- Werk je samen met mensen binnen je vereniging of mensen uit het dorp?

Situatie: Hoe zou je de huidige situatie en uitdaging van asielzoekers in Uithuizen?

- Krijg je iets mee van hun zorgen?
- Wat zou vanuit jou perspectief bijdragen aan het welzijn en van asielzoekers in Uithuizen?

Connectie: Naar jou mening, hoe zie jij dat de rol van vrijwilligers bijdraagt aan een gevoel van thuishoren bij asielzoeker in Uithuizen?

- (Denkt u dat vrijwilligers een rol spelen bij een gevoel van thuis door asielzoekers in Uithuizen?)
(Indien ja, hoe?)
- Heb je situaties meegemaakt met asielzoekers die hebben geresulteerd in een positieve ervaring of een betekenisvolle relatie?
- Hoe kijkt u aan/ervaart u (tegen) de impact van uw bijdrage bij het integratieproces van asielzoekers?
Welke vormen van bijdragen of steun denkt u dat de asielzoekers het meeste helpt?

Differences: Denkt u dat vrijwilligerswerk en initiatieven helpen (ondersteunen) bij het integratieproces? (Indien ja) Op welke manieren en hoe worden ze hierdoor geholpen?

- Zijn er weleens lastige momenten, of moeilijke situaties geweest door cultuurverschillen? (Indien ja) Hoe bent u omgegaan met deze uitdagingen?
- Vanuit welke overtuiging werkt u in de omgang met vrijwilligers?

Boundaries in Rural Context: Wat zijn volgens u de grootste beperkingen voor het (steunen van het) integratieproces van de asielzoekers, door de omgeving/licging van (Uithuizen)?

- Wat denkt u over de beschikbaarheid en kwaliteit van de faciliteiten & middelen voor het integratieproces binnen het dorp?
- Heeft u het idee dat asielzoekers voldoende middelen hebben voor vervoer (OV, auto)

Opportunities in Rural Context: Hoe kijkt u aan tegen de mogelijke voordelen die het dorp (de dorpsomgeving) biedt?

- Denkt u dat de kleinschaligheid van het dorp bijdraagt aan het integratieproces van asielzoekers?
- (Indien ja) Denkt u dat het helpt bij het leren van Nederlands, of juist niet?

Appendix D: Inductive code tree

