

Project *brief*

Thünen Institute of Rural Studies

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Refugees in Rural Areas in Germany

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- **The widespread assumption that refugees do not stay in rural regions but are "just passing through" to big cities was not confirmed.**
- **Staying in a rural place of residence is favoured by living together in the nuclear family, by friendly contacts with the local population and by one's own progress in integration.**
- **An orientation to stay can be influenced by politics, the local administration and civil society. Civil society in particular contributes to creating bonds to a place of residence.**

Background and Objective

With the allocation of many refugees to rural regions in Germany from 2014 onwards, refugee migration and integration also became an important topic. In response, a collaborative research project emerged that was led and coordinated at the Thünen Institute and was conducted in cooperation with the universities of Chemnitz (Prof. Dr. Birgit Glorius), Erlangen-Nuremberg (Dr. Stefan Kordel) and Hildesheim (Prof. Dr. Hannes Schammann). The joint project was funded under the Federal Programme for Rural Development (BULE).

The focus was on the question of under which conditions and how humanitarian engagement and rural development can be successfully combined. Another question was how this can be positively influenced by politics and civil society. Eight rural districts in the federal states of Bavaria, Hesse, Lower Saxony and Saxony were examined empirically in detail. Four central integration dimensions were distinguished, each of which was analyzed under the responsibility of a network partner:

- Potentials for integration in rural areas in Germany (subproject [SP] 1),
- Refugees' viewpoints and perspectives (SP 2),
- Local integration policy and its support by the federal, state and EU (SP 3), and
- Civic engagement and the attitude of the host society (SP 4).

Other subprojects included the development of policy recommendations (SP 5) and project coordination (SP 6). The Thünen Institute was responsible for sub-projects 1, 5 and 6.

Approach

The common analytical framework of the joint project was the complex integration model of Ager and Strang (2008), which focuses on the areas of work, health, education and housing and also takes into account the legal framework, social interactions, the acquisition of language, local and cultural knowledge as well as security and safety aspects. Spatial mobility was added to this

model because, especially in rural areas, the accessibility to services can be a critical factor for integration.

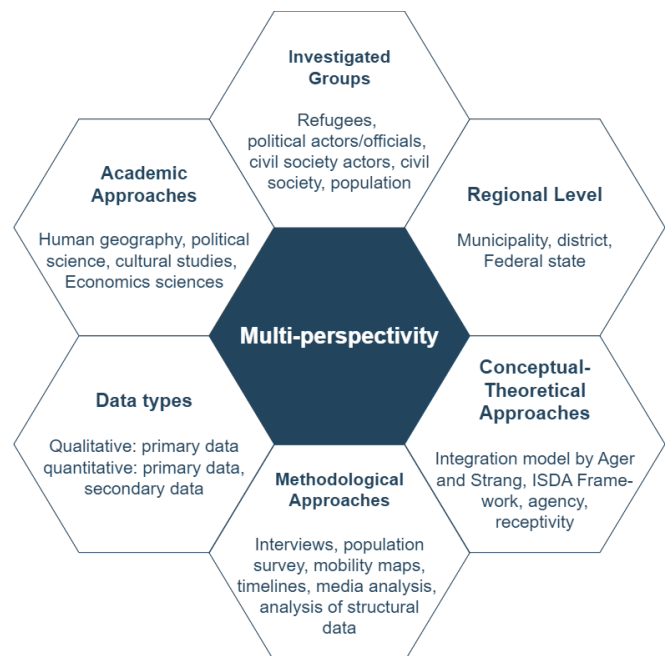


Figure: Aspects of multiple perspectives (Source: Mehl et al. 2022)

A multi-perspective approach was chosen as the research design (see figure). This considers the complexity of the research field, addresses diverse perspectives of migration and integration research and thus enables a multi-layered, multi-perspective and differentiated view of the integration of refugees in rural areas.

Results

In addition to the diverse results of the subprojects (cf. www.gefluechtete-in-laendlichen-raeumen.de), central results of the joint project have been recorded for three key areas:

- (1) Refugees' orientation towards staying, the role of the host society and local policy strategies,
- (2) everyday mobility and accessibility as factors for participation opportunities, and
- (3) social well-being of refugees as a prerequisite for staying in rural areas.

(1) The analysis of refugees' behaviour in terms of staying showed that, on average, about two thirds of the refugees with residence permits who were registered in a district between 2012 and 2021 and had been stayed there for more than 90 days, remained in the district in question. The common assumption that refugees do not stay in rural regions, but are only "passing through" to the big cities, could therefore not be confirmed. However, the differences between the districts studied are large. For example, the proportion of refugees staying in the rural Saxon districts is clearly below average (29% for the district of Bautzen). The highest proportion of people who stayed is in the district of Vechta in Lower Saxony, at 77%. "Stay-orientation" can and is promoted by local actors in politics, administration and civil society. In three study districts, the promotion of the permanent settlement of refugees was described as a task to mitigate the effects of demographic change. In the other five districts, implicit local holding orientations dominate, i.e., a general hope that locally holding the refugees succeeds. In all districts, civil society plays an important role in shaping a retention orientation by contributing to establishing ties to a place of residence through various forms of support.

(2) The analysis of the mobility situation of refugees shows the central importance of accessibility and everyday mobility as a factor of participation in rural regions. Refugees use a variety of transport options to be mobile in everyday life in rural regions and beyond. A key factor in all of the districts studied is access to motorised private transport. Refugees perceive this, adapt to local mobility practices, but also develop their own strategies for dealing with the existing mobility situation. Support from the local government and residents can make a significant contribution to reducing mobility-related exclusion and strengthening the orientation of refugees to stay in rural residential locations.

(3) Long-term retention of refugees in rural residential locations depends, among other things, on a positive attachment to a place as well as embedding in a local social community. From the perspective of the refugees, social well-being in the rural place of residence is determined by living together in the nuclear family as the most important social network, by friendly contacts with the host population, and by progress in self-motivated individual integration. Due to the rather small size of the social area, the high level of local identification with the place of residence and a neighbourly support structure characterised

by reciprocity, the residential locations studied promoted favourable structural conditions for integration. At the same time, however, a high level of expectation with regard to new arrivals and a rather low willingness to change on the part of the local population were also noticed. Another striking factor was the comparatively high proportion of negative attitudes towards refugees, which corresponded with little intercultural experience. Volunteers take on a central bridging function to compensate for structural and institutional obstacles for refugees. This is particularly evident in the areas of housing and the labour market, in dealing with authorities and in facilitating mobility.

A total of 15 recommendations for action for integration practice were derived from the research results (Schammann et al. 2021):

1. Combining potentials and resources of village and regional development with integration work.
2. Involving immigrants in shaping processes of social change
3. Using rural potential for systemic solutions
4. Strengthening voluntary work in the long term
5. Making local administrative practices coherent and cooperative
6. Making immigration and diversity visible as an existing part of local narratives
7. Actively addressing mobility challenges
8. Facilitating access to private housing and stabilising housing conditions
9. Facilitating access to the health system
10. Creating inclusive meeting places and opportunities for language practice
11. Addressing employers as integration actors
12. Understanding integration work as democracy work
13. Realigning funding programmes for integration work in rural regions
14. Thinking more about the potential of rural areas when making distribution decisions
15. Improving the data basis for integration work in rural regions

Further information

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Partner

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1983

Publications

Mehl et al. (eds) (2022)
 Geflüchtete in ländlichen Regionen Deutschlands. Springer-Verlag
 DOI: 10.1007/978-3-658-36689-6

Schammann et al. (2021) Zukunft für Geflüchtete in ländlichen Regionen: Befunde und Handlungsempfehlungen aus einem interdisziplinären Forschungsprojekt, ISBN: 97873865762306

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