

The role of rural grocery stores in refugee reception

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Our research with rural grocery store managers in Denmark suggests that the integration of asylum centres into the local social and economic life in rural areas is a key factor in successful refugee reception.

In Denmark, asylum seekers are required to stay in asylum centres while their asylum applications are processed. During this time they are not allowed to work or pursue education but are provided with accommodation and a small stipend to buy food and other essentials. Waiting times range from around six months to more than ten years in some extreme cases, and the number of asylum centres fluctuates with the number of asylum applicants and the length of processing times: in 2007 there were only seven asylum centres in Denmark; in 2016 the number exceeded 100, and it is currently 22. While the Danish Immigration Service is responsible for asylum seekers in Denmark, they subcontract the work to asylum centre operators, either the Danish Red Cross or one of several rural municipalities. Rural municipalities now administer more than half of the centres.

Rural communities in Denmark, across the Global North, are characterised by an ageing and reducing population, declining job opportunities, and the closure of local businesses as well as welfare institutions such as schools and retirement homes. There are therefore good economic arguments for rural municipalities to host asylum centres.

First, the closure of many welfare institutions in rural areas means that there are unoccupied buildings – often municipally owned and relatively cheap to rent – that can be quickly refitted. Second, rural municipalities are particularly interested in the jobs and secondary economic benefits derived from the asylum centres, such as the creation of demand for other services including remodelling and maintenance, which means more work for locals in a context where the creation of even a small number of jobs has a big impact. Third, the enrolment of asylum-seeking children in

local schools can stave off school closures. Similarly, asylum seekers of all ages can support local associational life, for example by participating in local football clubs.

Finally, because of the relative isolation of many rural asylum centres, asylum seekers often have little option but to spend their money locally, which in particular means buying their food at local grocery stores. When we asked grocery store managers to rate the importance of asylum centres to their overall business only one felt the centre had no positive effect on their business; seven reported a small effect, eight a medium effect, and three a powerful effect. Three managers told us that their stores were dependent on the business from the asylum centre for their survival.

Social hubs and gatekeepers

As well as being merchants, the store owners and managers whom we interviewed saw themselves as upholders of their communities. One said, “We say that we are kind of an unofficial mayor. It is important that we are present at town events and support local initiatives.” Partly as a result of the closure of other informal social meeting places such as schools, stores were increasingly central to local community life. They provided locals with a place to meet and talk but they also supported local associations and institutions in a deeply interwoven circuit of economic and social exchange. The threat of closure of such stores was understood to have real economic consequences for the entire community.

In this context, grocery stores could function as gatekeepers for asylum centres. One store manager on the island of Langeland, for example, asked his staff to only speak positively of the town’s newly opened asylum centre, feeling that so long as there

had not yet been any negative experiences it was important to support it as he would any other new institution in town. This was in part due to his appreciation of the custom that the asylum centre brought to his store but also as a way of bolstering the collective spirit in the town and showing that the community could make it work. For him this also meant working with local voluntary associations (particularly the local football club, which he sponsored) to create opportunities for asylum seekers to participate.

Another store manager explained that she quickly found herself helping asylum seekers to navigate her store, the local community and in some cases even the asylum system, and so had become a contact point for interactions between the asylum centre and the local community.

For asylum centres, having good relations with local communities can open opportunities for cooperation with local institutions and voluntary associations, which can widen the social opportunities of asylum seekers and combat the sense of isolation and frustration that tends to characterise their waiting time.¹

Social and economic incorporation

While polarised national debates often frame asylum seekers as either victims in need of saving or threats to the social order, local communities tended to be more pragmatic through experiencing asylum seekers' participation in local community life, for example as consumers, football players or school pupils. One of our rural respondents said, "Now that [the asylum centre] is here, the question is 'How do we make the best of it?'".

However, local communities sometimes complained about the relative seclusion of asylum centres from local community life – often understood as a lack of involvement with local institutions and a certain obscurity as to their daily operation – as well as a perceived lack of communication with authorities and centre operators. The resulting disapproval could exacerbate the local isolation of asylum centres and those living there, as well as put local political pressure

on the hosting municipalities to limit their cooperation with the Danish Immigration Service. At best, this would mean a failure to capitalise on the opportunities available through local cooperation; at worst, this could spell the closure of the local asylum centre.

There is thus important work to be done in building and expanding relations and communication with local associations and institutions. Managers and staff at the asylum centres may contribute to this shift by buying necessities for the centre locally, using local venues for events, and hiring locals, thereby involving the institution in local economic life. These steps in turn create dialogue and intersections with local associations, who can provide opportunities for asylum seekers and voluntary support for the asylum centre. This might mean developing and sharing a local playground rather than building a separate one for the asylum centre, or asking local associations if they can use unneeded furniture from the centre rather than throwing it away.

Local communities prove useful partners for asylum centres but this relies on actively working to interweave asylum centres with local social and economic life, rather than operating them as isolated – and isolating – institutions.

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