



The rural response to Europe's refugee crisis

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By 2015, the influx of migrants to the EU from areas of conflict in the Middle East and Africa had reached the point that political talk was of a 'refugee crisis' in Europe.

Greece, as a major point of entry for several migrant routes, has been the most affected. Other Member States, including Hungary, Sweden, Austria, Finland and Germany have had to deal with unprecedented numbers of asylum seekers.

While migration policies still remain of national and European competence, local authorities carry a huge human, financial and technical responsibility to respond to the changing realities in front of them.

This article examines the actual and potential role of Europe's rural areas in providing positive responses to challenges along the stages of the 'migrant journey'. It particularly considers the role that LEADER Local Action Groups can and do play in making a positive difference in this context.

A NEW SCALE OF MIGRATION CHALLENGE

THE IMPACT AT POINT OF ENTRY

COMPLEX CHALLENGES ALONG MIGRANT ROUTES

THE POTENTIAL FOR MIGRANT INTEGRATION IN RURAL AREAS

THE ADDED VALUE OF THE LEADER APPROACH

CONCLUSIONS: WHAT CAN RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY DO FOR THE REFUGEE CRISIS

A NEW SCALE OF MIGRATION CHALLENGE

Europe has long faced significant population flows, such as those caused by the wars and persecution of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the current migration challenge is on a different scale again, with a much wider variety of motives, routes and countries of origin.

According to the International Organization of Migration, **more than one million migrants and refugees crossed into Europe by land and sea in 2015**. This landmark figure was officially reached on 21 December⁽¹⁾ and represents a fourfold rise on the total for 2014. Furthermore, at least 3 700 refugees died or went missing in the crossings.

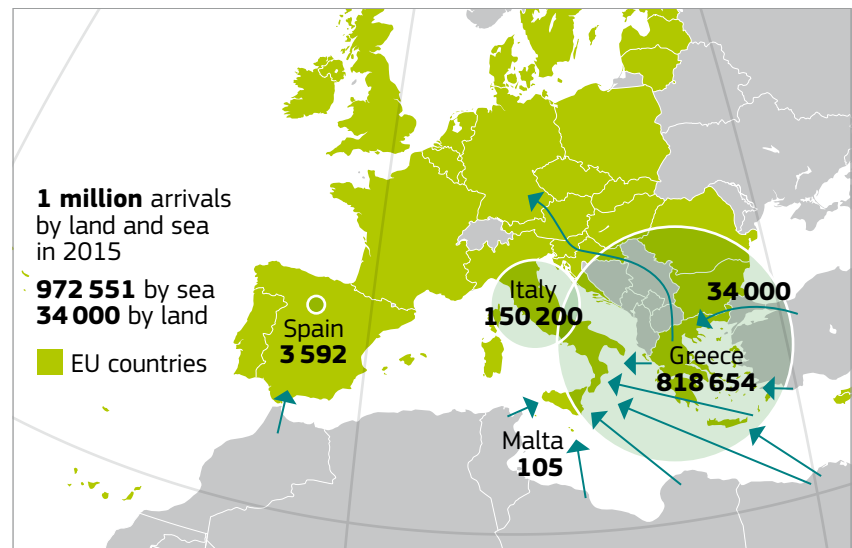
The **number of people seeking asylum** in the EU during the third quarter of 2015 reached **413 800** – a 150% increase in the number of first-time asylum applicants compared with the same quarter of 2014 and almost

doubled compared with the second quarter of 2015.⁽²⁾

This total number of applications for Q3 2015 came from **citizens of 149 countries**. Nevertheless, this diversity should not hide the fact that **84% of migrants and asylum seekers** originated from Syria,

Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, and Iraq – all countries experiencing conflict, widespread violence and insecurity, or highly repressive governments. More than half of the asylum applications to the EU in 2015 were from Syrian citizens alone.

Figure 1. Migrant points of entry in the Mediterranean region



Source: UNHCR, IOM

EUROPE'S REFUGEE CRISIS IN CONTEXT

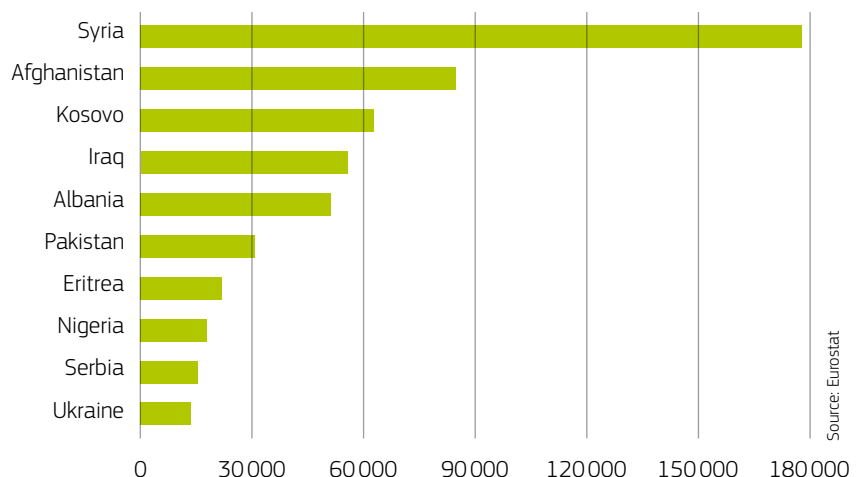
Despite the unprecedented scale of the refugee crisis in Europe, it is worth remembering that it is far from being the most affected region.

- Worldwide, **86% of refugees under UNHCR's mandate in 2014 were in developing countries.**
- At the end of 2014, the world's **top refugee host was Turkey**, followed by Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia and Jordan. EU countries hosted a relatively small share of that number.
- In 2014, **asylum seekers represented only 0.08% of the whole EU population.**

Source: UNHCR Global Trends 2014

Figure 2. Top 10 origins of people applying for asylum in the EU

January – October 2015, first-time applications



Source: Eurostat

(1) IOM: www.iom.int/news/irregular-migrant-refugee-arrivals-europe-top-one-million-2015-iom ; www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35158769
 (2) Source: Eurostat <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-press-releases/-/3-10122015-AP>

THE IMPACT AT POINT OF ENTRY

The challenge presented by the refugee crisis is very different across the EU. The impact is most dramatic at the points of entry, with Greece particularly affected.

The one million refugee arrivals in 2015 entered via six European Union nations – Greece, Bulgaria, Italy, Spain, Malta and Cyprus. However, the impact of these arrivals is very unbalanced even between this small group of countries. As the map on the previous page shows, more than 80 % entered via Greece and a further 15 % via Italy.

Furthermore, the differences are even more extreme behind these national-level aggregates. The situation is particularly difficult for some areas and localities representing common entry points. In particular, islands such as Sicily – on the North African migrant route – and Lesbos, which is often a first point of contact for refugees from Syria and Iraq, are bearing the brunt.

Many refugees arrive in a critical state, both physical and psychological

having suffered all manner of dangers and exploitation along the way. In the current emergency situation regions and localities are under intense pressure – and struggling to cope with the need to welcome, assist and process very large numbers of incoming people.

Humanitarian support – including emergency medical attention, food, warm clothing and temporary shelter – is often provided by specialised NGOs, public health workers, the coast guards

and security forces, together with the voluntary work and solidarity of many local people.

At the point of arrival, the measures of the Rural Development Programmes have had little impact so far. However, as shown with the Greek example below, the staff and partners of LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs) are often heavily involved. The impact on their local development mission is often substantial – both in a professional and a personal capacity.



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THE GREEK ISLAND OF LESVOS UNDER STRAIN

Lesvos lies at the frontline of the current migration crisis. Around 268 000 refugees arrived between January and October 2015. Given that its population was less than 90 000, the island has struggled to cope with such a mass intake of people.

Anastasios Perimenis, the manager of ETAL, the Lesbos Local Development Agency, explains that the 'official' response has been mainly coordinated by NGOs, which "connected quickly with the local community and set up an informal system that provided quite a lot of relief".

Nevertheless, processing the sheer numbers of arrivals has placed a huge burden on the system. Two temporary shelters accommodating around 3 000 have struggled to cope with up to 7 000 at peak times. Moreover, shelters are also a solution refused by many refugees who are afraid of being forced to take asylum in Greece rather than going to the country where they have relatives.

Despite the strain on the island's resources, Mr Perimenis

has been surprised by the tolerant attitude of the islanders, despite some minor incidents, and their willingness to volunteer to help. "I have seen local people getting together and cooking in the street for thousands of people. I have seen people on an idyllic beach, enjoying our nice Greek summer, seeing boats arriving and giving away even the clothes they are wearing – that includes tourists as well."

Nevertheless, tourism has been affected by the crisis and many tour operators are cancelling their plans. While efforts to continue the sustainable development of the island are carrying on – including three major programmes funded by the EAFRD (two) and the EMFF (one) – Lesbos' changing face makes Mr Perimenis "extremely worried" about the future.

"We're taking on a huge burden, which is not fair for such a small island, and many other islands in Greece are similarly affected... we need to act fast; we need to have the kind of reflexes that allow solutions to prevail. We need real solidarity, tolerance and dignity," he concludes.

COMPLEX CHALLENGES ALONG MIGRANT ROUTES

For most refugees, the point of entry is not the (desired) final destination. The result is a complex map of migrant routes across Europe creating challenges and risks of tensions along the way.

Despite requirements under European law, the majority of migrants do not ask for asylum in the first EU country they enter. Rather, they look to continue their journey across EU territory to reach their main destination – often a country where they already have settled family members, or which they believe offers them the best opportunities for settling.

As the map below shows, common migrant routes flow up from Greece and Italy towards countries such as Germany, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, France, Belgium, Netherlands and UK.

The journey through Europe can last well over a month – depending on access to transport and delays at borders and various control points. Whilst not as extreme as the situation for ‘entry points’, being a ‘transit territory’ can also create a huge burden for local authorities, often badly equipped to cope with the extra demands.

The Member State which receives by far **the most asylum applications is Germany**. In quarter two of 2015 alone – before the major influx of summer 2015 – it received over 73 000 first-time applications,

compared to the next highest 32 810 in Hungary, 15 250 in Italy and 14 775 in France. From January to October 2015, Germany received more than 315 000 new applications.

THE UNIQUE CASE OF HUNGARY

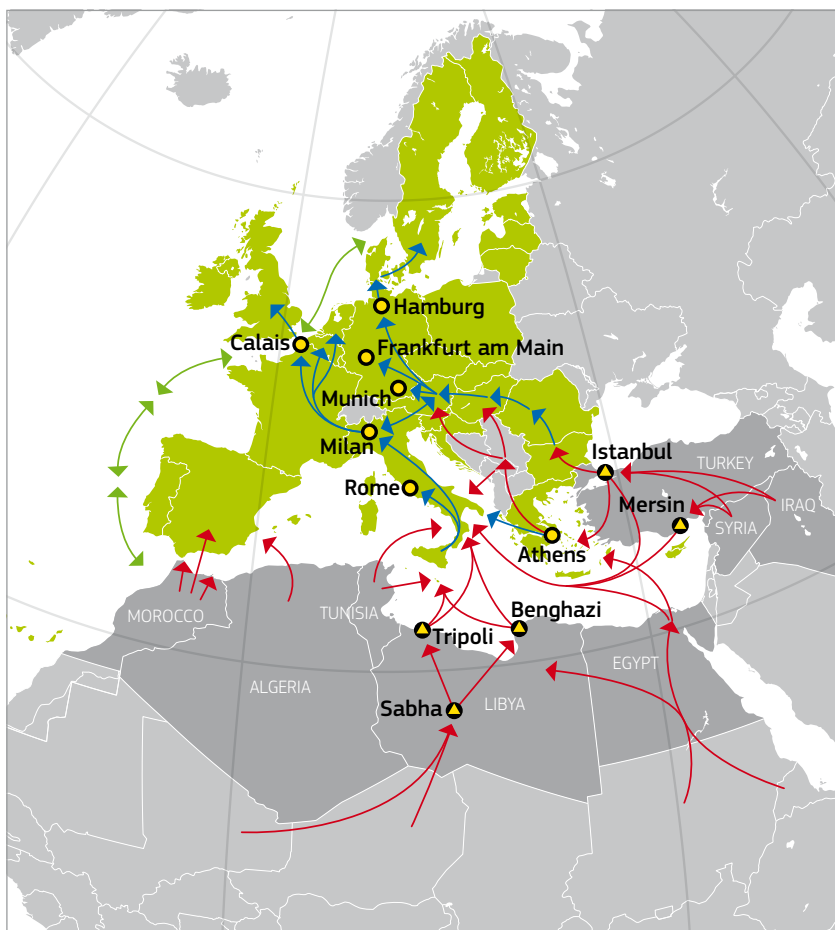
One Member State particularly impacted by the common migrant routes has been Hungary. Many migrants who originally enter the EU through the Bulgarian-Turkish or Greek-Turkish land or sea borders then proceed through the Western Balkans into Hungary. This is known as the ‘**Western Balkan route**’⁽³⁾

Hungary saw increasing numbers of migrant arrivals in the first half of 2015. In terms of the number of **asylum-seekers as a proportion of the country’s national population**, it was Hungary which had the greatest number in this period. More than 1 450 asylum applications were received for every 100 000 residents; the equivalent figure for Germany was 323 and for the UK it was only 30.

However, compared to other EU countries, **asylum acceptance rates are extremely low** in Hungary. In 2014, it accepted only 9.4% of applications compared to 94.2% in Bulgaria, 76.6% in Sweden and 76.2% in Cyprus. The figure for Germany was 41.6% (see on following page).

Feeling unable to cope with this influx of migrants, **Hungary erected fences to close its borders** with Serbia in September 2015 and with Croatia in October 2015.

Figure 3. Map of migrant routes across Europe



Source: EUROPOL

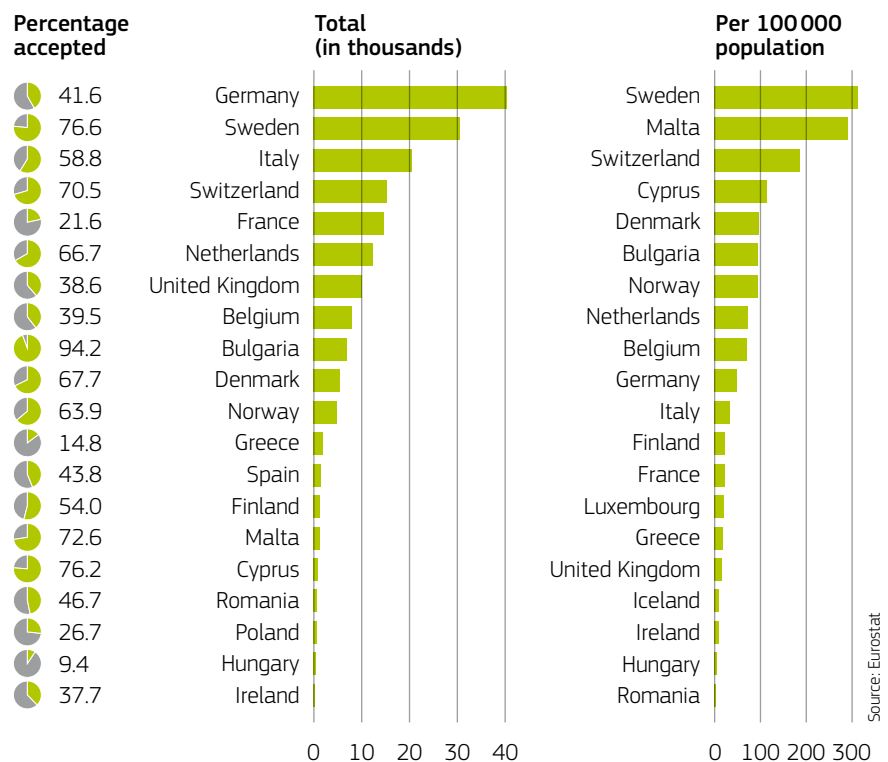
(3) FRONTEX, the EU’s External Borders Agency: <http://frontex.europa.eu/trends-and-routes/western-balkan-route/>

Furthermore, these are just the numbers seeking asylum. German officials have said that **more than a million** immigrants had been counted in Germany's 'EASY' system for counting and distributing people before they make asylum claims.⁽⁴⁾

In terms of pure numbers, Germany is also the Member State that accepts the most refugees. However, as The Economist recently pointed out: "when taken as a proportion of existing citizens, it drops to tenth place... **Sweden** however, a relatively small nation of around 10m, is highly accommodating by both measures: it comes second in positive decisions overall, and top as proportion of population, (taking 317.8 per 100 000)."⁽⁵⁾

See figure 4 on the right, which uses 2014 data – the latest available at the time of writing.

Figure 4. Positive decisions on asylum applications by Member State, 2014



THE POTENTIAL FOR MIGRANT INTEGRATION IN RURAL AREAS

Despite the challenges posed, rural areas can take advantage of the opportunities provided by an influx of migrants as a source of new vitality to restore declining villages.

Beyond the challenges, the arrival of migrants can also create new opportunities for growth – particularly for areas suffering from population decline and closing services, not uncommon amongst Europe's rural areas. Migrant contributions can be financial, but also in the form of social remittances, exchange of expertise and cultural change.

Peter Backa, senior expert on rural development in Finland, believes that migration represented a "big chance" to repopulate rural areas that could otherwise be left to "die in peace". In spite of the problems, he said that immigration was "a challenge that rural areas have to take".

There are clear potential win-wins for refugees and declining local areas in Europe. Nevertheless, the stakes are extremely high. Well-coordinated and sensitively managed integration policies can benefit both migrant and hosting communities; whereas mistaken policies, even if well-intentioned, can produce an angry and dangerous backlash.

Highlighting the positive contribution of migrants to rural areas can be fundamental to changing public perceptions. Nevertheless, "it is always important to allow the local community to have a say in proposed measures and to bring them along in the integration process," confirms Peter Backa.

Successful integration requires a sensitive and holistic approach which does not ignore but seeks to address the challenges and opportunities presented by migration. As stated by the European Commission, "Integration is a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of Member States".⁽⁶⁾

Approaches need to be tailored to the situation and characteristics of the migrants, as well as the specificities of the host society. This can be done at a very early stage of planning. For example, in Zaragoza, community associations consulted newly arrived groups of migrants on the local Immigration Integration Plan.

(4) www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911

(5) www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/09/daily-chart

(6) A Common Agenda for Integration Framework for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals in the European Union COM(2005) 389 final

A recent OECD policy paper on migration⁽⁷⁾ further underlined the importance of coordination between different levels of governance to prevent local communities from being overwhelmed.

Equally, successful integration needs to address the needs of the refugees themselves. One of the main challenges is to provide good reasons for successful asylum seekers to stay

in rural areas rather than moving to larger urban areas, where the possibility of employment may seem greater and where friends and family may already be living.

Petri Rinne, Joutsenten Reitti LAG manager, Finland, emphasises that a long-term approach is needed. “There needs to be sufficient time for the newcomers to settle down in the rural area,” he says. Moreover, new arrivals

are more likely to be successfully integrated, if they are used to living in rural areas. His area receives arrivals from Myanmar and these people tend to settle quicker than those from large cities.



MIGRANTS AS A RESTORATIVE FORCE FOR DECLINING VILLAGES IN ITALY

Riace, a small rural village in Calabria in the very southern tip of Italy, was destined for obscurity due to a massive exodus of its inhabitants. Today, it has been repopulated through immigration.

Its particular story started in July 1998, when a boat washed up on the nearby coast with 300 Kurds on board. It was greeted with open arms by the local residents who offered support and shelter to the refugees.

The village mayor, Domenico Lucano, fought to obtain national and EU funding for the settlement of refugees and is clear in his belief that these migrants saved Riace: *“Migrants who arrive here are useful people. They have allowed us to rebuild and reopen schools, to launch businesses, to revive the village,”* he says.⁽⁸⁾

In the 17 years since the first arrivals, around 6 000 refugees of many different nationalities have come to the village. Whilst many move on to other destinations, some of them stay, creating a positive impetus for local economic development. Many old buildings in the village have been refurbished to provide accommodation and several immigrants have settled to set up their own craft or retail businesses.

Together with other similar villages, Riace is part of a national network of 376 municipalities called SPRAR, the Protection System for Refugees and Asylum Seekers.⁽⁹⁾ Riace is a model of what SPRAR calls an “integrated welcome”.

More information:

<http://aeidl.eu/images/stories/pdf/italie-en.pdf>

THE ADDED VALUE OF THE LEADER APPROACH

LEADER Local Action Groups have the potential to play a key role in supporting effective approaches to integration of migrants in rural areas for mutual benefit.

Phil Hogan, Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, recently affirmed: *“Together, we must therefore proactively ask the question: ‘how can rural areas and the communities that live in them leverage their strengths to be full partners in developing global solutions?’”* Rural Development policy has a vital role to play here.

At a recent symposium on migration, Hans-Olof Stålgren, coordinator of the Swedish Rural Network, emphasised that

the LEADER method could be one of the “strongest and best tools to use... Using the local network of LEADER is really key to making these people friends and individuals. That way we can strengthen integration and inclusion.”

Local Action Groups can support the integration of migrants in two main ways:

- Depending on the priorities and procedures of the RDP that finances them, LAGs can in principle design and implement

integrated packages of their own measures to support integration. These can include: animation and advice, training and capacity building, support for various services, business support and so on.

- LAGs can also play an important brokerage role in bringing together the different stakeholder groups – municipalities, social services, NGOs, and other actors – that are vital for really integrated approaches.

(7) OECD migration policy debate sept 2015

(8) www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/03/migrants-life-village-italy-calabria

(9) www.pratomigranti.it/index.php?pos=1&id_sezione=177&id_lingua=2

The German LAG in Bad Berleburg provides housing with a central accommodation facility for refugees. Since 2014, around 5 000 people were housed. Of these, 570 stayed in the town, representing 3 % of the total population. The newly selected LEADER project ‘Welcome Culture’ is now developing further activities – round tables, youth cafes, integration bus etc. – to further promote the positive potential of refugees for the town.

Lovisa Carneland, former manager of the URnära LAG in Sweden, highlights the importance of getting civil society on board to ensure social cohesion between migrants and host communities. “It’s not us against them, but we together as a community, and that’s one of the important things that we have learned through this programme,” she says.

Illustrating this, the Swedish LEADER projects ‘Meeting Place among the Baking Trays’ and ‘People’s House’ created new meeting places for Swedes and immigrants based around

cultural activities. So has the very interesting Austrian LEADER project ‘RIKK’, which aims to improve the social climate in the region through networking activities and educational programmes.

The ‘GrowBiz’ LEADER project in Scotland provides community-based enterprise support in rural Perthshire. ‘GrowBiz’ works with a local project, the ‘Minority Communities Hub’, to offer

guidance on self-employment and business start-up to any immigrants or refugees who are interested in enterprise. This has resulted in several successful businesses run locally by these ‘new Scots’.



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THE ORUST EXAMPLE

The island of Orust off the western coast of Sweden is the third largest in Sweden, with a population of around 15 000, of which 1 000 live in a small town called Ellös. A refugee **camp housing 150 asylum seekers** is located in this town, a significant number considering the size of the local population.

To overcome the local population’s initial fears and concerns about security and create a **‘welcoming culture’**, the owner of the camp invited local organisations, such as the Red Cross, the church, football clubs and theatre groups, to a talk on cooperation and how to give the newcomers the possibility to establish themselves in the community. Positive messages were also spread via social media.

*“Many people were talking about this in a good way, so almost directly when the refugees arrived, the camp and these local organisations started to arrange meeting places, where the local inhabitants had the possibility to meet the refugees – and **once you get to know people, they become friends,**”* says Maria Gustafsson, manager of the Swedish Rural Network and an Orust resident.

Volunteer teachers went to the camp to help refugees **learn Swedish**. Furthermore, local employers have offered **internships** to asylum seekers, particularly linked to their existing skills, including in farming, veterinary, nursing and mechanics. This helps language learning and for newcomers to make useful contributions to the life of the community.

Refugees have also become involved in **cultural activities**, particularly a ukelele group – so much so that the leaders of the group decided to move their rehearsals to the camp. Numbers shot up from 30-40 to more than 150 members and they even started to tour the region together.

The rural areas themselves have benefitted. Ms Gustafsson explains: *“In my village, the school for ages 13 and over had recently closed down before the refugee camp, but the school has now reopened.”* Reviving rural populations also helps maintain hospitals and doctors’ surgeries.

“Those that come think that there are more possibilities [in urban areas], so we need to... show them how much possibility they have locally,” concludes Ms Gustafsson.

CONCLUSIONS: WHAT CAN RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY DO FOR THE REFUGEE CRISIS?

There is real potential for Rural Development policy to play a role in contributing solutions to the refugee crisis, particularly through LEADER support for rural integration.

In the early stages of their arrival and journey through Europe, asylum seekers need various forms of emergency relief. Rural Development policy has not so far been significantly applied here, although we have seen that staff and partners of LEADER LAGs are often in the forefront of support.

However, Rural Development policy really comes into its own in the final crucial phase of integrating asylum seekers effectively into society and achieving benefits both for them and for rural areas.

The RDPs have a series of Measures which can be adapted to the needs of integrating asylum seekers in rural areas. These include:

- The Measure for 'basic services and village renewal in rural areas' which could in principle support investments in reception centres and other services;
- The Measures for farm and business development – which can support start-ups.

However, the most powerful tool available to rural areas is undoubtedly

the 2 400 LEADER LAGs that cover almost the entire rural territory of the EU. They can support the implementation of truly integrated packages of support involving the full range of local stakeholder groups.

Some Managing Authorities – such as the Swedish one – are encouraging a more flexible approach, allowing LAGs to use the full battery of eligible Measures, even if they do not explicitly mention migrants. This kind of flexibility could make LEADER a very powerful instrument to support migrants' integration.



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