



ARTICLE  
SPECIAL SECTION

# Asylum Seekers in Small Villages: Spatial Proximity and Integration in Italian and French Villages

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*What happens when asylum seekers from African or Middle Eastern countries are resettled by authorities in small European villages? When they arrive, are they welcomed, or on the contrary, rejected by villagers? Generally speaking, overseas migrants usually wish to be resettled in large European cities. As for European villagers, they tend to form communities closed on themselves, so one might expect a rather cold reception. However, fieldwork in Italian and French villages where asylum-seeking migrants were resettled shows that this is not necessarily the case. Having observed resettlement experiences in the Italian region of Molise and the French region of Alsace, we discovered that, wherever migrants are hosted within the confines of a village, villagers get frequent opportunities to meet them, learn to communicate with them, and spontaneously offer help, especially to children, women, and whole families. The lack of a common language does not prevent day-to-day interactions or development of interpersonal relations. Children go to school and are keen to learn the host society's language; adult migrants receiving help want to reciprocate by working for free, thus allowing them to quickly learn European ways and skills. If most asylum seekers eventually leave for larger cities, the months spent in a village prove to be a useful step preparing them for further resettlement.*

## 1. Introduction

Within the already very diverse landscape of international migrations coming from overseas to European countries, an emerging phenomenon has been taking place: the settlement of asylum seekers in European *villages*. The idea that as far as *integration* is concerned, the size of the hosting city does matter, has indeed been around for a while (Schiller & Çağlar 2011; Schiller & Çağlar 2009; Balbo 2015). However, most research has focused on resettlement in big cities where the numbers of immigrants are far greater, and

where diversity is more visible (Lamanna et al. 2018; Dekker et al. 2015; Otto & Steinhardt 2014; Caponio 2010; Babel 1998).

There is of course already a considerable literature on asylum seekers coming from countries internally torn by civil wars, from Syria and Iraq to Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Libya, and beyond. It shows, among other things, that whenever migrants are free to choose where to resettle in Europe, they will opt for large cities. Indeed, these are

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places where they can hope to find not only work and other conditions allowing them to reconstruct a decent way of life, but also communities of previous migrants originating from their own country, who could help them find housing and explain them the formal and informal rules they do not yet know.

However, due to the increase in the incoming flows of asylum seekers and to the scarcity of refugee integration in large cities, European governments came to try reorienting part of these flows towards middle- and small-size cities, with populations ranging from 30,000 to 120,000 residents. A team of Dutch researchers even boldly proposed to consider the village as the best resettlement place, because it is there that solidarity and cooperation would best flourish (Jonckheere et al. 2010). Therefore, some local governments and cities have become more entrepreneurial, developing their own integration philosophies and policies (Prakash 2001; Scholten & Penninx 2016). Studies on this new policy have begun to appear in recent years (Balbo 2015; Bonifacio et al., 2017; Mahieu 2020; Gauci 2020; Ambrosini, 2018; Caponio & Borket 2010; Delcroix & Inowlocki, 2021).

Newcomer integration is commonly understood as a two-way process involving both immigrants and the receiving society (Penninx & Garcés-Mascreñas 2016). Consequently, when investigating newcomers' integration, the questions are not only what immigrants do, with whom they interact, and how they identify themselves, but also whether they are accepted and how they get positioned in each of those three dimensions (Penninx & Garcés-Mascreñas 2016). Indeed, in the context of contemporary crises and potentially increasing flows of migrants, the establishment of new reception facilities in cities can risk provoking feelings of hostility, racialized opposition to incomers, and ethnic competition at local level (Zurlu 2017; Hubbard 2005).

However, other research projects show inclusive responses grounded on local identities of hospitality and welcome (Driel & Verkuyten 2019; Sarlo 2015). While initial hostility might be directed at reception facilities, there is research that suggests that these can be short-lived with hostility receding as asylum seekers become part of local relations (Bygnes 2020; Whyte et al. 2019). A key means of easing tension locally is by fostering social contact, as it is known that routine interactions across difference can play an important role in generating peaceful coexistence (Wise 2009).

This article will present the results of two research projects carried out respectively in Italy and in France with the aim to observe the resettlement of asylum seekers in small villages. Since we found very few studies on asylum seekers' reception and resettlement in villages of a few hundreds or thousands of inhabitants in the literature,<sup>1</sup> our work can enrich the field showing

the paths of integration policies and their results in this environment, as seen from the perspective of the people (citizens and authorities) engaged in the resettlement.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In Italy as in other European countries, the recent refugee crisis has shown the structural weaknesses of urban policies which aim at integrating migrants into host societies (Coulibaly et al. 2018). Some of this failure's symptoms are, for instance, the confinement of migrants in camps as a result of reception policies, or their segregation and marginalization as consequences of housing them in urban areas where physical degradation, social problems, and poverty are endemic (Monno & Serrelli 2020). Failures in the process of migrants' integration into urban life have been often explained by a gap between theory and practice due to an implementation deficit. Problems in coordinating different logics and steps of the integration process, ineffective multilevel governance arrangements, the inefficiency of local administrations in implementing national policies at the local level, and pockets of resistance among segments of the population constitute many of the roadblocks on the path towards local integration (Coulibaly et al. 2018).

Reception policies which aim to control, to regulate, and to dilute the flows of migrants and their impacts give shape in most cases to spaces of reception that become "spaces of exception" (Agamben 2005) in which migrants get separated from city life. Such a phenomenon directly challenges the idea of the city as an integrative and open place which allows for the mutual coexistence of strangers. In fact, public spaces appear crucial for coexistence and the creation of *micropublics* through the spontaneous encounters between locals and strangers (Amin 2002; Briata 2019; De Certeau 1980; Zorlu 2017; Rotenberg & McDonogh 1993).

The spatial dimension has been studied from the *communal living* point of view. Research has shown that cohabitation of non-family members can be a potential solution for, among others, suburban alienation, social isolation, and environmental issues (Jonckheere et al. 2010; Williams 2005). Proponents of communal living describe the relationship between inhabitants as akin to "ties between villagers", considering the village as the ideal type of setting where solidarity, cooperation, and all types of support can flourish (Jonckheere et al. 2010).

More recently, Matthieu Tardis (2019) has studied the feasibility of resettling migrants in middle-sized and small cities, as well as the relative weight of local authorities—starting with the mayor—in the whole process. Jean-Pierre Gauci (2020), upon request of the EU's Committee of European Regions, studied

integration of migrants in thirteen cities of middle- and small size (as well as two villages) in Germany, Italy, Sweden, Belgium, and Bulgaria. The report shows that in a clear majority of cities there is a relatively positive attitude towards migration generally and migrants' integration.

One basic conclusion of urban researchers about migrants' integration is that, although the national frame of racial and ethnic relations remains important, much of the negotiation of difference occurs at the local and even very local level, through everyday experiences and encounters (Amin 2002). "*Integration happens locally*", says a very experienced person in charge of migrants' integration in a German city of 125,000 inhabitants. "*A city determines everyday life. It is here where people feel if they are equals and welcome*" (quoted by Gauci 2020, 7).

### 3. Data and methods

This paper is the result of a 2019 encounter between its two authors at the midterm Conference of the European Sociological Association's Research Network on *Belongings and Borders: Biographies, Mobilities, and the Politics of Migration* at the University of Strasbourg. The first fieldwork took place in the southern Italian region of Molise (about 315,000 inhabitants).<sup>2</sup> At the time (2017) Molise hosted a total of 3,698 migrants from Senegal, Gambia, Ivory Coast, Mali, and Nigeria. Migrants thus represented 11.9% of population, as compared with the Italian national average of 3.1% (*Data on International Protection in Italy 2017*).

The research project surveyed the local population's attitudes towards upcoming migrants in three small villages of less than 1,000 inhabitants each: Pescopennataro, Roccamandolfi, and Ripabottoni. It began by interviewing local authorities (mayors, the President of the National Association of Italian Communes, and the President of the Province of Isernia) as well as the owners of the cooperatives that manage the reception centers. Later on, semi-structured interviews were carried out with a sample of villagers on their thoughts about the presence of refugees, whether they knew what activities these refugees participated in, and how they evaluated the consequences of the arrival of refugees in the village.

The data relating to the French case is based on material collected by Daniel Bertaux and the members of the French-German research network Migreval. In 2015, Daniel Bertaux, Catherine Delcroix, Lena Inowlocki, and Ursula Apitzsch created an **international qualitative database** as the result of a French-German research cooperation between the University of Strasbourg (France) and the Goethe University of Frankfurt (Germany). It gathers biographical interviews with migrants who arrived in France and Germany from

the 1950s up until today, as well as semi-structured interviews with professionals, politicians, priests, and members of the civil society supporting migrants.<sup>3</sup> The interviews are conducted using a common interview guideline that focuses on the biographical experiences related to the arrival and integration of migrants.

Thanks to these materials, the author has been able to analyze the life stories of migrants in the Grand Est region, a French region bordering Germany. After having analyzed the interview of Father Adel, Daniel Bertaux discovered how this Dominican priest born in Northern Iraq had been very active in exfiltrating many families fleeing Iraq and resettling them in various Alsatian villages. Bertaux then decided to make an inquiry in one of the villages (here called Mondfanger) in which a family of migrants had been sent. He interviewed the former mayor of the village and a member of the city council who had organized the reception of that Iraqi family. He was told that for two and a half years, twenty inhabitants of Mondfanger had helped this family integrate into French society. He conducted a second interview with Father Adel on his life story as a migrant to understand to which extent resettlement in villages is a good practice for migrants. All interviews, including the testimony of the son of this Iraqi family, were analyzed in an on-going, collaborative French-German research seminar which is a constitutive part of the Migreval research project.

In this article the expression "biographical approach" is referring to the experiences and interactions of refugees/migrants with members of different local agencies and institutions, as well as their evaluation of reception policies. "Biographical policy evaluation" analyzes the concrete effects that policies have on the biographies of individuals who have experienced them (Apitzsch et al. 2008). This approach discloses how different policies (immigration policies, entry regulations to national countries, access to the asylum procedure, policies in the fields of housing and education, as well as support by volunteer associations) are biographically intertwined in migrant's lives, rather than remaining separate entities.

Biographical narratives are also especially valuable in expanding our understanding of the *courses of action* developed by refugees/migrants, as well as the *strategies* they employ to adapt to (or resist) given policies. Our reconstructive analysis of the "biographical evaluation" of migrants' encounters and experiences with institutions can yield critical insights on how policies are put in practice, resulting in enabling or on the contrary obstructing migrants' efforts. The methodological challenges of such an approach imply establishing working alliances of trust and shared interest with our interview partners among migrants and professionals, contextual ethnographic observation in the different locations, and a contrastive comparative approach in our analysis to understand the specifics of each local setting in relation to others.

Having described the evidence collected by the two authors of this article and their sociological implications, it is possible to highlight convergent traits that will be exposed later in the conclusions.

## 4. Two Case Studies of Overseas Migrants' Resettlement in European villages

### 4.1 Resettlement and reception in the Molise Region (Italy)

The Italian reception system of asylum seekers provides that, after landing and requesting international protection, the authorities move migrants to reception centers where they stay (for a maximum of three years) as asylum seekers until they are granted refugee status; after which they have to fend for themselves. There are two kinds of reception systems: the SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), a national system in which local authorities cooperate with the Ministry of Home Affairs but play the main role; and the CAS (Reception Center for Exceptional Cases), also managed by the Home Affairs Ministry who funds private actors to manage the reception of refugees on their own, thus bypassing local authorities.

We have presented above the methods used to monitor, in three Italian villages of the Molise region, the reactions of local authorities and population towards the resettlement of migrants in their locality. As it goes, these reactions were quite different from one village to the other.

Pescopennataro and Roccamandolfi:

Pescopennataro is a 250-person village in the mountains (altitude 3,900 feet) and its mayor had proposed to host migrants. In 2017, three migrant families—six adults and four children—were resettled there.

The mayor explained why, in the name of the village, he had volunteered to host migrants: "We have taken in people, because they can also represent an added value for the village. With such a small number we will be able to guarantee an effective integration to these families".

In the interview, villagers talked about their relations with migrants, each outlining the benefits of welcoming the migrant families to Pescopennataro. The first said, "they keep company to our elderly: they seem to communicate, even if they don't speak Italian very well and our elderly don't know a word of English". The other two focused on the role of the youth migrants, saying: "Now at last, the village numbers some youths. Young people have gone away, so there were no babies, and no future for Pescopennataro. Now there are young migrants and a few children!" and "one of the migrant women has had a little girl, tiny Mary: she was baptized, and an employee of the SPAR was chosen as godmother!"

The restricted area in which the life of the village develops (a square, a bar, and two small grocery stores) made interactions between migrants and citizens possible, which progressively developed to be relations of friendship and trust. The importance of sharing urban space becomes evident when comparing Pescopennataro and Roccamandolfi, which is also a mountain village 2,500 feet above sea level with 900 inhabitants. There is a reception center, a CAS, which is located about four kilometres from the central square. As a result, migrants live in a sort of isolation and villagers believe that they do not have any opportunities to get to know them better, saying: "They live far; how could we know how they spend their time?" and "Sometimes they come in the city center, for example when there is a party; but otherwise, no. We don't know them."

In Pescopennataro, the very small size of the village and, most importantly, the constant presence of migrants in the community facilitated a spontaneous process of mutual acquaintance: the initial absence of organized activities did not seem to prevent proximity between immigrants and villagers, and integration was proceeding on its own. A few weeks after migrants' resettlement, the SPRAR Cooperative started organizing integration activities, such as projects based on the vocation, skills, and competences of migrants, taking into account the locally available resources (structural, professional, and economic).

Three years after migrants' arrival, the head of the integration project said:

In organizing projects, one must consider their [migrants'] past experiences and their will, not forgetting their origins (...). We organized sewing courses. The women had already manual skills; they said they wanted to do this type of activity (...). For the men we organized—in agreement with the mayor—"work grants" in agriculture and construction. For example, they learned how to use the "forklift"; and they took "Safety at work" courses (...) Together with a city councillor—who has now become the mayor, we organized many things. For example, we have organized parties, such as the Halloween party! On these occasions, local people celebrated together with immigrants.

The mayor is the owner of the project, while the cooperative has the task of managing it. So, we hold regular meetings together. Having a good relationship with the public administration is the key to doing a good job! This is not the case everywhere. In another village the mayor is not very interested in our job. So, the results obtained are lower: they are still positive, but they are minimal, and not of excellence.

At the end of the interview, she concluded:

Of the three families present in Pescopennataro, two left the SPRAR program and moved to other regions

(in Italy) because the heads of these families have been integrated into the labor market in these regions (...). The cooperative helped them to find a job.

The third family is now leaving the program; but they will stay in Pescopennataro, mother, father and their four children. The head of the family, after an adequate job training provided thanks to the program, has been hired with a regular contract by a local company in the building sector! According to the law, their humanitarian residence permit has been converted into a work permit thanks to the regular employment. They are doing well in Pescopennataro! Moreover...four children in such a small village as Pescopennataro are really a beautiful thing!"

Ripabottoni:

Ripabottoni is a medieval village of 500 residents about 2,100 feet above sea level. The citizens' daily life takes place in the main square where there is only one bar, owned by the mayor, as well as the Town Hall. The square is crossed by the main street where there are two grocery stores. Everyday life takes place within 400 yards. The CAS center, managed by a private association, is a building formerly used as a barrack, located on the main street, only three minutes from the central square.

When, in 2017, 32 migrants who landed in Lampedusa were sent by the Italian State to resettle there, the villagers were shocked, saying: "The day before, everything in the village was normal; the day after, 32 migrants arrived!"; "We didn't receive any notice beforehand"; and "32 migrants in such a small village as Ripabottoni, this is too many".

The mayor was especially offended: "It could have destabilized the population (...) My authority was completely ignored by the people who opened the CAS center (...) I had no control whatsoever about how the CAS would spend public money, nor about which activities migrants would have to do". So, the mayor and a few villagers organized an—unsuccessful—protest against migrants' resettlement and asked the Prefecture to close down the CAS.

Meanwhile however, several villagers collected clothes and other necessities for the migrants, thanks to the mediation of the village's priest. The first days passed quickly, and a lot of integration activities were organized by the CAS and the priest. During ethnographic observation some migrants were observed spending time at the bar and some of them sat with local people. Ripabottoni citizens told us: "The CAS is located a few yards from the square, so migrants can come to the bar, and we can meet them"; "The CAS is located in the right place, because so close to the square makes it possible to integrate them"; and "They try to speak Italian, and we try to understand them".

When asked whether they knew about migrants' activities, villagers showed they were well informed and sympathetic: "They study Italian: they are learning, but it is difficult for them"; "Some of them sing in the Church choir with some of us, even if they are all Muslim"; and "We also organized a football match together!" Some migrants were invited to participate in the village's football team: "Without them the team wouldn't have existed, because there were not enough young men in Ripabottoni".

The interviews showed how, over time, the population and the migrants spent time together, establishing friendly relations and positive contacts. Direct contacts in the bar, in the church, and in the square made it possible.

However, this is not to say that villagers were easy to interview in Ripabottoni. After the first interviews in the bar, the mayor—who was also the owner—came and sat down at the counter. From that moment on, nobody was willing to answer any questions. Going deeper into the matter, one might wonder whether the mayor's authority (and his well-known opposition to migrants' resettlement) might also have determined the villagers' initial attitude towards the CAS. In villages or very small towns, the mayor is a very influential person; in Ripabottoni he was (and still is) also the owner of the only recreational activity in the area. Therefore, he can easily put pressure on the villagers.

Weeks after our interviews, the mayor applied to open a SPRAR center for minors. The hidden reason behind this initiative was that the opening of a SPRAR would lead to the closure of the CAS: according to a rule establishing a limit of migrants' reception based on the number of citizens in the local population. The prefecture finally authorized him to open a SPRAR and ordered the closure of the CAS.

However, by that time the villagers did not want the CAS to shut down. They organized a protest and collected signatures to keep it open. Thus, the very same population that before the arrival of the migrants had signed a petition against its opening, presented a petition asking to reconsider its closure and organized a pro-migrant demonstration. During this protest, citizens spoke to journalists who came from all over Italy: "We did not expect this forcing!"; "This village is giving a good example of warm reception!"; and "It is not fair that they have to leave in this way: divided and sorted out in other reception centers. They're not postal packages!" Despite the villagers' protests, the CAS closed and the 32 migrants it hosted were dispatched to other reception centers in the region of Molise.

Later, the village of Ripabottoni received a special mention at the tenth edition of the Chiara Lubich international Award for Fraternity (*Premio internazionale per la Fraternità*) because of its citizens'

commitment to solidarity. The village's mayor did not show up to collect the prize; he did not even announce to the citizens that they received this honor. Fortunately, two town councillors heard about it and showed up to receive it.

#### 4.2 *The Resettlement of Iraqi Asylum Seekers in Alsatian Villages*

As has been explained above, the French fieldwork on which the present article is rounded is part of a much larger research project, the Migreval research project. Beside the life stories collected (whose number is now close to 200 and still growing), interviews with local authorities, social workers, and members of associations of volunteers helping migrants are also conducted and stored in the Migreval data bank. In addition, sessions of data analysis are regularly held, with a particular focus on the actual functioning—and possible dysfunctions—of various public policies concerning migrant newcomers as documented through their personal testimonies.

Among volunteers who had been interviewed previously was a remarkable man, born in Iraq, who had come to France 30 years earlier to study and become a Catholic priest, and who is a member of the French Dominican order. Father Adel (this is the pseudonym he chose) was born in the mostly Christian city of Qaraqosh, about 30 kilometres from Mosul in Northern Iraq. He had felt the vocation rise within him from an early age and had left Iraq at age 20 to study and become a priest in France where he became a very active Dominican. As he was coming back to Qaraqosh each summer to be with his family and community, he had followed closely the rise of the militant jihadist organization ISIL or ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or Syria), also known as Daesh (from the Arabic acronym), and was fully aware of the danger it represented for his family and community. In June 2014 ISIL militias attacked Qaraqosh and its Christian inhabitants began to leave the city to take refuge in a region controlled by Kurdish forces. The latter defended the city itself until August 6th, the day they suddenly left. The remaining Christian families had only a couple of hours to leave all their belongings behind and flee for their life towards Kurdistan territory.

In the following months and years, Father Adel devoted all his resources and contacts to try and get as many Christian-Iraqi families out of Iraq. It had indeed become a matter of life vs. death for them:

You see, these people would and did sacrifice all they had rather than lose their faith. They were given a choice by the Islamic State: "If you want to go on living here, you MUST convert to Islam!". But these people just could not convert to Islam. The whole of Iraq used to be Christian for centuries, before Muslims came from Arabia in the 7th century and conquered everything, little by little. Until Christians became a tiny minority

and fled to live in the North, in mountains in the very North. How do you want us to convert to Islam when our ancestors taught us that they sacrificed their lives to keep their faith? Christian faith for these people is primordial; more than the house, more than properties, more than one's income.... No one converted to Islam.

Being well aware of the tragedy faced by Iraqi Christians, Father Adel talked about it with as many French medias as he could. He also got invited to speak to the (French) Senate and to the European Parliament in Strasbourg. As he knew quite well every step of the complex procedure to come to France as an asylum seeker aspiring to the status of refugee, he began helping those Iraqi Christians who were ready to emigrate to France. He met the French consul in Babli (Babylon) and even succeeded in getting an appointment with Laurent Fabius, who was the French *Ministre des Affaires Étrangères* (Foreign Affairs Secretary). Recounting this meeting Father Adel said:

I met him four days after our massive deportation, in the beginning of August 2014. I described him the invasion of our region by Daesh, the self-called Islamic State. And I proposed him to organize a collective immigration in France of Iraqi Christians, who were all terribly suffering and in great danger. He asked me, "How many of them?"—120,000!

But unfortunately, he immediately said: "oh no, I do not have the power to do that! The Parliament must be consulted first, and some other institutions too. Even if they are persecuted and suffering, we cannot receive 120,000 persons.

Nevertheless, Father Adel was able to help hundreds of Christian families to get out of Iraq and come to Strasbourg. In order to find volunteers and resources to help them settle, he would frequently give conferences about the plight of Christians in Iraq:

After the disaster over there in August 2014, families that arrived in Strasbourg during the first eighteen months all rapidly found their happiness here. Housing was found, residence permits, and other documents were quickly done by the administrations, State help rapidly came within their pocket, children were enrolled in schools ...Everything was easy, really very easy, because they were few.

But in the last six months, since last September (2018), there are many more difficulties. For instance, there is not much housing available, and there are many families looking for it. I know several families that have been put in small rooms in downtown cheap hotels, in small rooms, quite dirty... People cannot cook in the rooms; this is normal, it is the rule in any hotel, but what do they eat? Sandwiches, chocolate bars... The children, oh my God, I am crying when thinking about their situation.

This is how Father Adel started looking for housing in Alsace's small towns and even villages for upcoming refugees.

And there, these people are far better received, much better! By local people, by the local church, by Protestant as well as Catholic associations, by Evangelists...The persons who welcome them open their houses, open their hearts as well. In the villages of E., G., B., W., O. we have families; and in all these villages, these families have been really very warmly welcome. We picked them up at the airport and brought them directly to a village where everything was ready for them: housing, help, school, French lessons, everything! And these ones find this marvelous! Such families, all of them are happy, happy, happy, happy of how they were welcomed by a host family, and of all the things that their hosts have done for them.

At (name of a village) an apartment that was vacant and empty was filled in one single week with everything necessary: people from the village brought things that had been set aside in their attic, an old fridge, an electric stove, kitchen tools, sheets, pillows, blankets, a table, chairs; and everything is free, free, free! People are generous you know. And, as they told me: "We were used to give money to voluntary associations already, but we did not know what was done of it, to whom it was given. Now we know exactly who benefits of it; and we are happy to see that it is used by people whom we know, and whom we like!".

It seemed therefore that in Alsace, and particularly in Alsatian villages, the local dynamics of receiving asylum seekers were akin those that had been observed in the Italian region of Molise by Stefania Adriana Bevilacqua. It was somehow counterintuitive, as the numerous villages of this rich agricultural region are well-known for consistently voting for the openly anti-immigration political party (the *Rassemblement National*) led nationally by Marine Le Pen. Having heard, somehow by chance, that the Alsatian village of Mondfanger had hosted an Iraqi family for a while, Bertaux called its mayor who confirmed the fact and invited him to come down to interview him.

Mondfanger:

This Alsatian village (whose name we changed to protect identity) of about 1,300 inhabitants had been economically successful prior to World War 2, mainly due to its wine economy. However, at the end of the war, the town was entirely destroyed when retreating German troops entrenched themselves in this village and tried to hold control of the area. After the war, neighbouring villages gave hospitality and extensive help to Mondfanger families. The latter passed on memories of that tragic period to their children and grandchildren, so that younger generations had some ideas about what it means to be a refugee.

Mr. S., a devout Catholic like many Alsations, had been the village mayor a few years before. After his retirement, as he was reading the local weekly published by Catholic and Protestant associations, he was struck by an article about Iraq. It described the dramatic situation of Christians who were in great danger of being slaughtered by the jihadist group ISIL. This was in November 2015. The article ended with a call to readers to save some of these families by accepting to receive them if they succeeded in leaving Iraq. Mr. S. recalled:

During that night I could not sleep. I was thinking: why not us? My two sisters and me, we had inherited our parents' house, which was now empty. I asked them if they would agree housing there one of these families from Iraq. They both agreed. I called people I knew in Strasbourg to get contacts in Iraq; but none knew how to proceed. I had given up the idea when one day, as I was riding a local train, comes a man dressed in white who sits in front of me and starts a conversation. He was a priest; Father Adel was his name. He had been in France for thirty years but was originally from Iraq.

"From Iraq? I am ready to house an Iraqi family in distress."

"Are you serious? May I get your phone number?"

A few days later, Father Adel called him and came to his house. The two men got along very well, and Father Adel explained to the former mayor how he could get an appointment with Mr. Fabius, who had shown a genuine interest in the fate of Iraqi Christians and would help him. Mr. S. went to Paris and briefly met Mr. Fabius, who promised to help. Two months later, in January 2016, Mr. S. got a phone call from Iraq. It was Father Adel: "I have been in Erbil. I have a family for you. You still ready?" "Of course!" Mr. S. responded. And in March a whole family fleeing Iraq landed at the Strasbourg airport: father, mother, and three adult children.

Back in Iraq this family had been rather well off: the father owned a restaurant in Mosul and catered, employing 25 people. They had known Father Adel for a long time. After August 2014, when ISIL took over Mosul and the nearby Christian town Qaraqosh, the family had just had the time to flee, leaving everything behind. Soon afterwards the mother discovered she had cancer. They had heard that in France cancer treatment was very good; so, they contacted Father Adel. He tried to get them French visas for medical treatment, but to no avail. He finally told them to get tourist visas and fly to Strasbourg.

We went to pick them up at the airport, with several cars: they had told us they would bring a lot of luggage. We drove them to Mondfanger, and to the house they were going to live in. We had cleaned it beforehand, from top to bottom: Easter cleaning! Five-six rooms. We had brought a painter. So, when they saw it: "Waaooooohhh!!!!"

Neither the parents nor the grown-up children spoke a word of French when they landed in Alsace. Their language was Aramaic (the language Jesus Christ spoke) or rather its regional version, Syriac language. Mr. S says:

It was not easy to communicate with them. Only Mrs. A., the mother, spoke some English. Mr. A. pretended to understand. The mother was clearly the mainstay of the whole family. She was very pleasant to deal with. She also was obviously the one taking all decisions. The father had been a successful entrepreneur; but the loss of his restaurant, plus the flight, had devastated him. Unfortunately, the mother was suffering from a severe cancer. She needed treatment, urgently.

Right at their arrival, Mr. S. helped the whole family register for healthcare and convinced local health authorities to accept the mother for cancer treatment in the region's main hospital, at no cost. He also introduced her to a Lebanese doctor with whom she could speak in Arabic and who prescribed her medication. But there were a host of other problems to solve; and in doing so Mr. S. asked and received great help from other villagers:

And so, we could begin to get organized. Eventually we had twenty persons from the village who volunteered to help this family. My friend and city council member RD took up the task of planning in detail everything that had to be done for them. Everyone knew what he or she had to do, which day (for instance to drive them to administrations in Colmar, to French lessons, to the doctor, to the hospital...). The elder son took driving lessons. It was not easy for him: apparently, they don't have red lights in Iraq, he was just happy to drive through (laughs)... But when he eventually got his driving license, the villagers collected money and gave him 500 euros to buy a used car.

The family A. remained in Mondfanger for about one year, making friends and getting to know French ways. One year later, the mother succumbed to cancer. The whole village came to the funeral and she was buried in the village's cemetery. By then the grown-up children had learned enough French and understood enough about French codes and ways of thinking and doing that they were ready to take over from her. They had met Iraqi migrants who had settled in Strasbourg, where they would have more opportunities. They decided to move there. When they departed, the whole village came to tell them goodbye.

## 5 Findings and Discussion

### 5.1 Italy

Three main dimensions emerge from the empirical analysis: the relevance of the public persons' implication, the relevance of interpersonal contacts and interactions

between migrants and villagers, and the issue of "spatial proximity vs. distance".

Firstly, the three case studies lead to the tentative hypothesis that, when the State authority resettles migrants in a village, the mayor's attitude (positive or negative) is a decisive factor on the further development of resettlement. The local government and local political actors play a central role in villages because they can establish, or remove, local borders easily: they can support integration of refugees or actively fight against them. However, the case of Ripabottoni, where attitudes towards migrants changed rapidly despite the mayor's persistent reluctance, provides extra information: the implication of another key public person, here the village's priest, may influence the villagers' long-term attitude towards migrants.

Secondly, the two cases of Ripabottoni and Pescopennataro, where migrants had been resettled in the village midst and thus had frequent interpersonal contacts with villagers, shows convincingly the crucial importance of spatial proximity in allowing daily interactions. As was strikingly shown by contrast with the case of Roccamandolfi, where the only difference—the resettlement outside village limits—was enough to modify entirely the dynamics of mutual recognition.

Thirdly, there is the more general issue of public space in urban settings. In cities, migrants often tend to appropriate "urban voids" (McDonough 1993),<sup>4</sup> which become places where they can try to reconstruct the dynamics of "home", understood in a wider sense as the country they have left behind. As a result, urban space is experienced differently by local inhabitants and by immigrants. This leads to the creation of distinct public spaces: places such as parks, squares, and streets function as places of differentiation that, at times, may generate conflict and open the door to intolerance. The actual use of urban space takes on a peculiar connotation in relation to the physical interaction between citizens and newcomers in a common space.

In villages however, the "empty space" simply does not exist. Immigrants cannot take possession of a public space by transforming it into an extension of their own home, or into a "village" suspended between the Italian reality and that of some "elsewhere". The public space is necessarily a meeting space between newcomers and locals. Thus, in this different spatial context, emerges the central relevance of contacts and interactions to create interpersonal links between people who have never met before.

The case of villagers meeting migrants for the first time presents an additional, and crucial, characteristic: the relationship is underpinned by previous, reciprocal representations about two "categories" of persons ("Us" and "Them" that is, "Europeans" vs. "non-Europeans") that pre-exist in the public discourse and in the minds.



This empirical analysis shows how interpersonal contacts with people perceived initially as belonging to a stigmatized or potentially dangerous category may thoroughly change this representation, and finally to put an end to xenophobia.

In conclusion, the integration process may depend on opportunities provided by various spatial contexts. The sheer size of the municipality or urban unit (village or town) plays a central role: in villages the proximity appears to favor migrants' paths to integration, because of common use of the same public space which generate more frequent interactions. When and if hosted in the village itself, migrants become visible, and the relations they built with villagers can offer strong resources to offset their marginalization and rejection.

Comparing how well migrants were received in the three villages allows us to identify a counterintuitive result: when migrants are hosted in or close to the village's center a majority of villagers, through getting to know the migrants personally, as persons in their own right having a name and a personal history, quickly come to accept and actually welcome them. Conversely, in the village where migrants have been hosted far from the center, such interpersonal relations cannot start taking shape, and migrants remain perceived as mere undifferentiated members of a preconstructed *category* ("non-European migrants"). It thus would seem that the *frequency of interpersonal contacts* is the key variable; while other potentially relevant variables such as gender, age, race, religion, ability to speak local language, or even the village mayor's attitude appear, by comparison, less important.

Such results however were only tentative and needed confirmation from other empirical studies on migrants' reception in villages. One of them was precisely being on its way in the French region of Alsace, thus providing the possibility of a wider comparison.

### 5.2 France

The French empirical case brings new information about an alternative route leading Middle Eastern asylum seekers to European villages. It is an escape route, a humanitarian corridor, whose opening and management, while condoned by the highest State authority (here the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs), was left to be operated by civil society actors: here a Catholic priest of Iraqi descent and villages' mayors. This escape route leading Christian Iraqi families from Northern Iraq to various Alsatian villages has been described here from both ends: by Father Adel, the very energetic actor who opened it; and by the mayor of one of the villages who, at the receiving end, organized an Iraqi family's reception and mobilized volunteers to accompany and support its members through the complex steps of getting appropriate documents and access to social rights.

Mondfanger is an Alsatian village which thrives on vineyards producing excellent wines. Its villagers are well-off and vote consistently for the right-wing or far-right political parties and presidential candidates.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the warm welcome it gave to an Iraqi family—it must also have been the same in other Alsatian villages where Father Adel was able to resettle Iraqi immigrants—does not go without saying. Several factors must have contributed together to this warm welcome; but a single case does not allow to evaluate their respective weights. However, analytic comparison with the results of fieldwork in three Italian villages allows some tentative advances.

One might be tempted to think, for instance, that one of the factors which influenced villagers most positively was that the asylum seekers were Christians. Alsace ranks among the French regions where Catholicism is still prevalent. In fact, if there were not the Molise cases, this purported explanation alone would seem to be more than enough to account for the warm welcome.

However, the fact that this Iraqi family was Catholic was never mentioned during a whole day of conversations about how Mondfanger villagers spontaneously welcomed it so warmly. The fact that they were persecuted and in great danger appears to have been the key factor; this universal characteristic transcended everything else—religion, race, class—and one may surmise villagers felt rewarded *as human beings* by contributing to save other human beings from slaughter.

Such an interpretation is confirmed by the analytic comparison with observations of the Italian case. The migrants who had boarded ships on African coast to reach the island of Lampedusa, and were subsequently resettled in various Italian villages, were *not* Christians; most of them must have been of Muslim faith. It did not prevent Italian villagers, whom one may assume had all been raised in the Catholic religion, from receiving them warmly, once they got to know them personally, one by one, as human beings. Beyond differences in race, religion, and class there is a *common humanity* which, in dramatic situations, seems to take precedence over everything else.

## 6. Conclusion—European Villages as Decompression Chambers for non-European Asylum Seekers

The resettlement of asylum seekers in European villages seems, at first sight, doomed to failure given how much it goes against the grain of well-established patterns. Quite to the contrary, in fact: provided that some conditions are fulfilled, the spatial proximity induces daily interactions, and some of the villagers may perceive the arrival of asylum seekers in dire need of help as a rare opportunity to put into practice the values they have stood for all their life.

In the long run, villages are not the best place for (especially urban middle class) asylum-seeking families wishing to remain in a European country. In the short run however, they might constitute places where they could get good housing, practical help from well-disposed neighbors, where their children would grow up in a safe environment and quickly learn the language of the host society, and where they would learn, little by little, the host society's customs and habits which are usually very different from their own customs and habits. Villages might perhaps constitute the best places to learn the new society, and to prepare every member of the asylum-seeking family to find his/her way into the host society. In short, they might be the best "chambers of decompression", if one may use this image, for moving from one rather traditional and stable society to the competitive settings of urban modernity.

The ethnographic observations in villages of two European countries show that villagers' initial feelings of xenophobia melt in the air as soon as they meet and concretely communicate with asylum seekers from other continents. Xenophobia means fear of foreigners, but of foreigners who have not yet been met. Before meeting them, they were merely *imagined*. After meeting them, the dynamics of getting to know each other may transform an initially hostile village into a warmly welcoming community.

Such a turnabout may appear surprising if xenophobia is confused with racism. These two concepts are often associated; in the context we have observed however, their semantic distance appears in full light. Racism is an ingrained attitude and specialists have shown how difficult it is to change it. However, xenophobia may actually fade away when migrants are actually there. They are not all potentially threatening young males with a lot of adrenaline, as they were subconsciously imagined; most of them actually are mothers, younger women, female teenagers, children, and good men.

The inevitability of coexistence does not necessarily mean interaction, mutual exchanges, and mixing. The visibility of diversity can lead to a greater knowledge of the other, to a greater readiness to intertwine and to true inclusion; but it could also lead to the opposite, that is juxtaposition, difference, stigmatization, and suspicion.

In urban contexts there is some degree of space differentiation along the public/semipublic/semiprivate/private/intimate dimension, as well as along the "empty vs. occupied" dimension. So-called "empty spaces", for instance parks, squares, river banks, and sidewalks of avenues and streets are not convenient places to meet and interact with local residents; quite to the contrary. But in a village, there is no empty space. There is just no way for migrants to escape being seen or talked to. On the other hand, for villagers, there is no escape to being seen and talked to by migrants. The visibility and deconstruction of the "migrant" category made

inevitable by the frequency of impersonal contacts caused by the commonality of spaces does affect xenophobic feelings such as prior hostility and fear to the point of, ultimately, eradicating them.

Although data is still very scarce, the two research projects mention a convergent trend: most migrants who were first settled in small villages through some integration program will eventually move to cities when this option becomes available to them.

In the cases analyzed in Molise and in Alsace, despite the friendly relations established with villagers and having reached a significant level of integration in the community, most asylum seekers eventually decided to move to cities.

These examples might inspire a review of social and spatial integration models by introducing a new, two-stage model. The initial settlement in a village would only constitute a *transitory stage* before a new resettlement in a large city, especially for migrant families of urban origin. Villages could be considered as one of the best forms of transitory stages for asylum seekers who do not speak a word of the host society's language, because they are the best places for fostering daily *interaction* with host society's members; and because daily interactions seem to work as the best steppingstones to social integration.

In villages, this transitory stage or "decompression chamber" gives excellent results. This is true both for migrants, who learn a new language, meet the culture of the host country, and learn Western jobs; and for local citizens who will open to newcomers and their experiences, and who will see their village repopulate with children. Concluding, *spatial proximity* appears as *the* most important favorable condition, because the density of face-to-face interactions appears as the process through which the transmutation takes place.

## Notes

- 1 The first study is on the case of Riace (2,000 inhabitants) on the Italian Southern Calabrian coast, where (in 1999) the mayor accepted 450 stranded overseas migrants so as to rejuvenate his village. The other case, much less well-known, is the one of Hofheim (5,000 inhabitants) in Bavaria. Both cases have been studied by Gauci (2020). See also Elia and Jovelin (2017) and Sarlo (2015). Leclair (2017) is about the reception of migrants in villages from the very rural Tarn region in Southern France and is more of the reportage type.
- 2 The data relating to the Italian case that we present here were collected by Stefania-Adriana Bevilacqua (La Sapienza University, Rome), and are part of her research project about the resettlement, by the Italian State authorities, of Lampedusa-stranded migrants in the Molise region (on the Eastern, Adriatic side of the Italian peninsula).

- 3 This databank contains life stories of migrants who settled in Strasbourg or in the Grand Est region of France, as well as migrants arriving and settling in Frankfurt (region of Hesse, Germany). These interviews are transcribed, re-read and approved by the interviewees, then anonymized and pseudonymized (all identifying information are removed) and, lastly, added to the databank (in French, German and in English). Due to the sensitivity of such information, and because of the ethical issues related to storing such data, the databank, of which there are essentially no other examples in France and Germany, is only accessible to a limited group of researchers, as defined by the scientific and pedagogic directors. The interviews are conducted by the members of the network currently including junior and senior researchers as well as French and German masters level students. The gathered materials are discussed in a specific seminar. The biographical interviews are then cross-referenced with semi-structured interviews conducted with politicians, professionals and volunteers in contact with these populations.
- 4 Gary McDonough (1993) identifies four possible types of urban emptiness: the places where a distinctive sign of the landscape once stood, full of history or memory; those frequented by dog owners, junkies and deviants; those ready for future speculation and development; and those used as forms of control or barriers to prevent access to other places. The void of space is consequently filled with meaning, potential, and conflict.
- 5 In 2017, for the first round of presidential elections, Mondfanger citizens voted massively (82%). Together, the various Left candidates got only 15% of the votes. Emmanuel Macron, who presented himself as "neither Right nor Left", got 25%. The main right-wing candidate got 30%; and Marine Le Pen, the far-right candidate with a very explicit discourse asking for the immediate closure of Europe's borders to non-European immigrants, got 23%.

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