COMMENTARY

Asylum seeker dispersal policies – Setting the stage for successful integration?

by Caitlin Katsiaficas

National policies of dispersal, which seek to distribute asylum seekers across different parts of the country, typically give only limited consideration to newcomers' professional profiles and personal preferences and to characteristics of receiving communities. If they are willing to look at the fuller picture, and facilitate a better match, dispersal policies can become more effective in supporting integration and fostering local development.

2023 has seen another uptick in the number of asylum seekers arriving in the EU, highlighting again the uneven distribution of these newcomers across Member States, amid continued debate over what responsibility sharing should look like. Several EU Member States have opted to distribute arriving asylum seekers across their national territory, aiming to ensure proportional allocation throughout the various regions, for practical and political reasons. These policies have been criticised as impeding freedom of movement as well as access to networks and support. Research suggests that the current approach can be improved – and local integration and development supported more effectively – by considering further the profiles and preferences of those arriving and the particular characteristics of the communities receiving them.

A policy of dispersal

Several EU Member States have dispersal policies in place, including Austria, Germany, Portugal, and Sweden. While the capacity of the different reception facilities remains a key consideration, national agencies often also look at an incoming individual's family ties, any vulnerabilities or special needs, and personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, household size) when deciding where to place someone. While few go beyond this baseline, Portugal does also examine current employment and future work opportunities. The ability of asylum seekers to appeal their reception assignment varies from one Member State to the next.

With regard to how many asylum seekers to place in each region, Germany distributes people based on the Königsteiner distribution key, which takes into account the tax revenue (attributed a weighting of 2/3) and population (1/3) of each Länder (state). Individuals may be

obliged to live in a certain German state or municipality for up to three years. Austria's distribution formula takes into consideration the number of inhabitants in each province.

Regional governments may be permitted to decide how to distribute people across their constituent municipalities. German states often do this based on the population share of their municipalities and the respective accommodation capacity available. In Sweden, municipalities are encouraged to sign agreements with the national Migration Agency to receive asylum seekers, while the reception of unaccompanied children is mandatory.

(Where) do people stay in reception?

Whether or not a national government has a dispersal policy in place, it must determine to which reception facility a person or household is assigned. Research conducted in Greece and Italy for the EU-funded TRAFIG project found that some asylum seekers left the reception facilities in which they were placed to be closer to their networks or earn a living. However, while mobility could help individuals in these respects, they risked losing their place in the accommodation provided, and the services that came with it, as unauthorised absences may jeopardise their ability to stay in the placement provided. While neither Greece nor Italy have national dispersal policies in place, these cases underscore the fact that several personal factors are not typically taken into account by reception systems – and that this can have undesired consequences, namely that people decide to leave reception sites to go elsewhere in the country, even at the risk of losing important support.

(Where) do people settle in?

Small- and medium-sized cities, towns, and rural areas across Europe are increasingly involved in the integration of asylum seekers, partly as a result of national dispersal policies. The EU-funded Whole-COMM project investigated the integration experiences of migrants arriving in smaller communities since 2014 in 9 states (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Türkiye). The researchers found that smaller communities come with particular challenges regarding integration, including fewer employment opportunities, smaller support structures, and limited infrastructure compared to large cities.

The project found that not everyone who had been placed in one of these smaller destinations was interested in staying there. There were a variety of reasons given for this, from not wishing to live in a small community in general to a lack of alignment between newcomers' backgrounds and local opportunities; for example, their work experience might not align with the jobs available locally. Despite this, and given the length of many asylum procedures, some

did decide to stay after receiving a protection status – especially if their children had been enrolled in local schools. Some reported wanting to move on because there was a lack of things to do or more education or job opportunities elsewhere. Others enjoyed living in a smaller place, valuing the dense support network, feeling of calm and safety, and slower pace of life, with several mentioning that they found the setting a good place to raise a family.

The dispersal of asylum seekers across the national territory has implications beyond the reception phase, as it influences where people will decide to settle. As neither smaller nor larger destinations can be a good fit for everyone, gauging the particular preferences and profiles of each asylum seeker could help to place people in locations to which they are more likely to be suited, meaning they could be more likely to stay and, if they do, find it easier to settle in. This can facilitate integration and long-term settlement.

A good placement = a good fit

Incorporating a wider range of considerations into dispersal policies can help people go where there is a better individual fit. Failure to do so may mean that people who are ultimately granted international protection will continue to lack opportunities where they are, making it harder to find a job, continue a career, attend training, or join their network, all of which can hamper settlement in the true sense of the word. Onward movement may then be a coping strategy, which can support the individual's integration but can also be costly for all parties: The person moving may need to rebuild their networks and navigate settling into another new place, while communities lose people in whom they have invested. Incorporating further considerations into dispersal policies could not only mean more efficient use of government funding, it could also support more refugees to build sustainable futures and help smaller communities to better realise the [potential of migration to foster local development](#).

How to ensure a better fit?

As highlighted by [TRAFIG research](#), people are already independently moving in search of more stability, and would benefit greatly from being able to do so within existing reception systems and support structures – facilitated by increased flexibility. Allowing more mobility within states during the reception phase and taking peoples' preferences, networks, and opportunities into account during the placement process are two policy options. Doing so would help people to move *within* rather than *outside* the official system, supporting the early phase of integration and ultimately leading to improved outcomes for all parties.

In addition, algorithms represent an innovative strategy for improving the placement of asylum seekers in receiving communities, with the aim of maximising their success (often measured in labour market integration outcomes). Designed in the context of refugee resettlement, algorithms have more recently been utilised for asylum seekers and other migration-related purposes such as matching Ukrainians in Poland and Germany with German cities and newcomers with volunteers. Such algorithms match the personal profiles of newcomers with those of local communities to find the optimal available assignment, working within current placement systems. While using these tools to sort through the complex considerations at play, these approaches also maintain the ability of humans (staff involved in the placement process) to override decisions, leveraging their expertise.

GeoMatch is being used to analyse information on past immigrants (e.g., country of origin, language skills, gender, age), their experiences, and their preferences, with the aim of improving labour market integration. This algorithmic tool identifies patterns to see in which potential destinations a newcomer is most likely to be successful. It then recommends the optimum municipality for a given person. First modelled in the United States, where it was used to analyse refugee resettlement sites, this tool was later tested in Switzerland with asylum seekers who received subsidiary protection. It is currently being piloted in the Netherlands and Canada.

Match'In aims to generate more optimal and organised dispersal and matching between international protection seekers and municipalities in Germany. Under this pilot initiative, persons seeking international protection currently in reception can fill out a questionnaire, volunteering information on their specific personal characteristics. The information gathered covers multiple areas, including family situation, networks, housing needs, work experience, education and skills, hobbies and interests, preferences regarding environment, and health or other special needs. In the municipal context, data is collected on the availability of opportunities and infrastructure, including housing, language courses, education, work, health care, culture and leisure, mobility, and support services. Fed this information, the algorithm then finds the optimal match for the particular person.

These pilots will be important to watch as they mature and more research becomes available, and can provide inspiration for a more considerative placement process under national dispersal policies. In cases where such algorithms are deployed, attention must of course be paid to avoiding bias or other consequences.

Allocating can become matching

It is not simply a question of logistics. Current asylum seeker distribution approaches will be improved if they are based on the individual strengths and needs of asylum seekers as well as the characteristics of communities. Doing so will generate more positive integration experiences and outcomes, and enable newcomers to make a greater contribution to their new communities in support of local development. As it stands right now, this is largely a lost opportunity. It is also an opportunity which would not take a disproportionate amount of resources to take advantage of – and where sustainable inroads could be quickly made, given the appropriate backing.

While not all asylum seekers will be permitted to stay, some will remain – and the faster they can find and seize suitable opportunities, the better. An enabling environment from day one would be positive for the well-being and economic advancement of both newcomers and communities receiving them. Taking the time to personalise the approach taken under dispersal policies through the consideration of additional factors can set the stage for successful settlement, presenting rewards for newcomers and communities alike.

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