Life in the 'empty diagonal':

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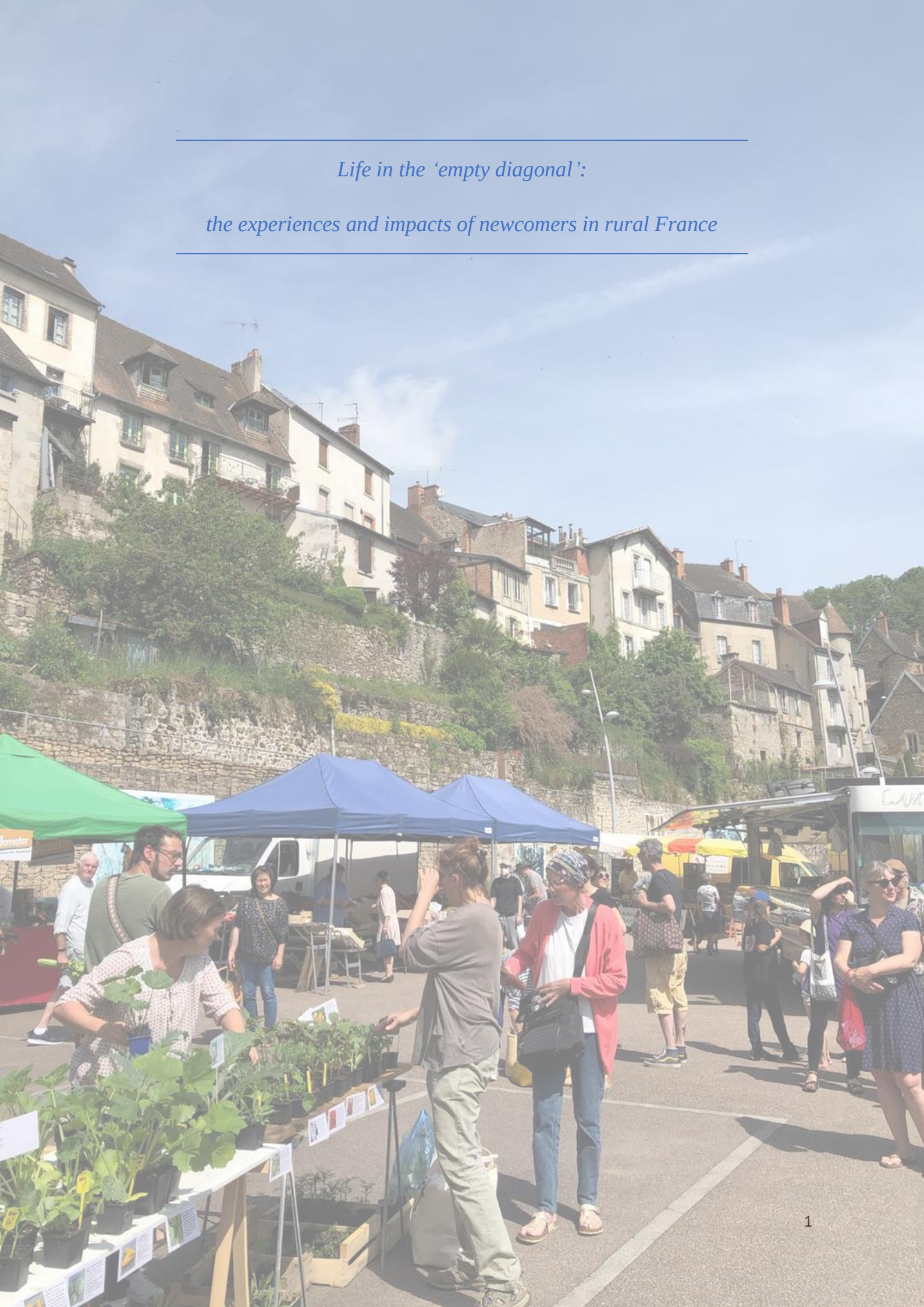

Life in the 'empty diagonal':

the experiences and impacts of newcomers in rural France

A case study.

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Master's Thesis – 0997102

MSc International Development Studies

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5 August 2022

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ABSTRACT

Two phenomena are occurring in parallel across France – the influx and subsequent resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers, and the gradual depopulation of rural areas. The intersection of these trends is found with the resettlement that is increasingly taking place in remote areas of the country that are encountering the challenges of rural shrinkage. This research aimed to assess what role these areas can play in providing a welcome space for newcomers despite the challenges associated with living in rural regions, as well as identifying the potential for livelihood improvement. Using a case study approach, this research took place in Aubusson and Felletin, two shrinking rural towns in France currently open to receiving newcomers in the context of increasing efforts to disperse refugees and asylum seekers across the country. Employing the concept of emplacement as an alternative lens to integration redirects attention away overarching distinctions between French locals and foreign newcomers and places the emphasis on facilitating local-level relations. The supposed divide between natives and newcomers is found to be more overlapping than initially anticipated. Ultimately, the study finds that a successful placement with mutual benefit for the community and new arrivals would be one in which there remains opportunities for work, functional essential services and facilities within a reasonable distance, and prospects of meaningful social interactions. Livelihood improvement in this context is feasible, and there are instances of highly successful initiatives that contribute to local revitalisation, but these are not guaranteed. Expecting newcomers to shoulder the burden for revitalisation and singlehandedly alter a town's development trajectory would be both unfair and unrealistic.

Key words: newcomer, rural shrinkage, emplacement, resettlement, revitalisation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Naming everyone who has contributed in some way, shape, or form to this rollercoaster of a research process would require a list the length of this thesis – for the sake of everyone's sanity, I will keep it concise.

I'd like to first extend my greatest appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Annelies Zoomers. Thank you for your guidance, motivation, and belief in my abilities.

Thank you to Andrea at Share SIRA, for your valuable insight and suggestions during my research.

To my family, who I so rarely kept in the loop but encouraged me throughout nonetheless.

To my lovely friends, my regulars table, for unwavering support, life-saving ice cream and coffee breaks, and reminders to take a break (or a nap).

To Chloe Kelly for scoring the match-winning goal of the England vs Germany Euros final during deadline week. I needed that.

To my couch-surfing hosts at the beginning of my research, who kindly offered me a place to stay and the first contacts for my research. Thank you for listening to a nervous, novel research student taking her first steps into the field.

And finally, to my newfound friends in Aubusson and Felletin, and all the wonderful participants in my research who so generously shared their time, stories and reflections with me.

Merci beaucoup !

Megan

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List of abbreviations

AGIR – Global and Individualized Support Program for Refugees (Programme d'Accompagnement Global et Individualisé des Réfugiés)

CADA – Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers (Centre d'Accueil de Demandeurs d'Asile)

DDCSPP – Departmental directorate for social cohesion and population protection (Direction Départementale de la Cohésion Sociale et de la Protection des Populations)

EU – European Union

INSEE – National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques)

JRS – Jesuit Refugee Service

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

OFII – French Office for Immigration and Integration (Office Français Immigration Intégration)

TPD – Temporary Protection Directive

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1. Introduction

1.1. Problem statement, knowledge gap, and relevance

Two phenomena are occurring in parallel across France – the influx and subsequent resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers, and the gradual depopulation of rural areas. The intersection of these trends is found with the resettlement that is increasingly taking place in remote areas of the country that are encountering the challenges of rural shrinkage. In all corners of 'l'Hexagone,' small town communities are opening their doors and providing welcoming spaces for newcomers. Geographically isolated and ostensibly closed-minded, rural regions are not typically known for their diversity.

The glaring paradox is that shrinking rural towns host older populations who are reputably more unwelcoming to newcomers, but it may just be these newcomers who contribute to keeping the town and its services alive. How do people experience moving to places that do not want, but need them? How do people experience receiving those they may not want, but need? This research paper elaborates on the case study conducted to identify the challenges and opportunities that present themselves within these particular circumstances.

Rural shrinkage has captured the interest of policymakers across Europe in recent years. While this phenomenon has been around for decades, if not centuries, the vast majority of research has homed in on shrinkage in urban areas. Aging local populations mean that these rural regions will not be able to sustain themselves in the long term; this will have social, economic, and even environmental impacts as working aged people leave to find better opportunities and the land is no longer maintained as before. France has seen increasingly disruptive and costly patterns of depopulation, especially noticeable in the aging demographic trends in the countryside (Tisdall, 2015). 'La France périphérique' (peripheral France) was the uniting title of protesters in 2019, who called for increased awareness and institutional focus on rural regions in France (García-Ariasa et al., 2021).

In the face of conflicts, crises, and ecological disasters, more and more people are in dire need of assistance. For those who manage to make their way to Europe in search of refuge, their struggles continue between applying for asylum, navigating complex administrative procedures, and finding a sense of belonging in these new countries. Many spend significant amounts of time in detention centres while waiting for their applications to be processed and subsequent accommodation to be found for them. Adequate environments and accommodation facilities are among the persistent challenges faced in finding durable solutions for newcomers to rebuild their lives.

Organisations across Europe have already begun to recognise the untapped potential of rural regions as areas for migrant emplacement. Migrant skills could contribute to local communities,

and in return these communities could provide a welcoming space for newcomers to settle and start to rebuild their lives. The varied experiences of those who have already settled in rural areas and ways in which this impacts the local community are fundamental elements to understand before determining the viability of these initiatives. Moreover, assessing the challenges and bottlenecks is equally important in order to mitigate them as much as possible and provide the greatest opportunity for success.

As homes around the continent now open to receive Ukrainians seeking refuge, the debates on how best to spread the weight of all newcomers across the country become increasingly exigent. Thorough understandings of the reality faced by those who have already gone through this move, the locals who step forward to support them, and the officials who mobilise their communities for reception are more imperative than ever.

While research on this subject is limited, those who have explored it emphasised the fundamental role and involvement of the local community if these projects are to thrive (Tardis, 2019). Current settlement policies are largely top-down, with systematic placement of incoming asylum seekers and refugees and little deviation from standard procedures or understanding in which environment these people have the best chance to build a decent life. Without researching feasible alternatives, the conflicts that come with migrant settlement policies as well as that of rural decline will endure.

In particular, this research aimed to learn about potential possibilities of making migrants part of rural communities by exploring in depth the realities of Aubusson and Felletin, two towns facing rural shrinkage who voluntarily received refugees. The experiences of local communities hosting newcomers and the experiences of newcomers within those communities will be described and critically analysed in order to understand whether hosting these newcomers in rural areas is a viable alternative to cities.

1.2. Research aims and question

The core objective of this research is to paint a comprehensive picture of the reality of life as a newcomer in rural France and impact they have on their host environment. The case study approach allows for detailed accounts and analyses of particularities. Being set within the wider scope of the Welcoming Spaces project means it contributes to the compilation of studies seeking to explore how effective it is to receive newcomers in shrinking areas that are seeking to revitalise.

The research question that this paper seeks to answer is therefore:

- *What is the potential role of rural shrinking areas to host newcomers while offering space for livelihood improvement?*

The following sub-questions will add depth and structure to the research:

- *What are the characteristics of such localities?*
- *What are the characteristics of the native population, and what opportunities or limitations do they see?*
- *What are the characteristics of the newcomers, and what opportunities or limitations do they see?*

1.3. Thesis structure

Following this introduction chapter, Chapter 2 will first establish the theoretical framework within which the research is situated. This entails a literature review of current debates and approaches to the research topic, covering both the concepts of newcomers in rural areas as well as the perpetual shrinkage that so many regions are facing. The conceptual framework is outlined and provides a visualisation of how these theoretical elements are perceived to connect and interact.

Subsequently, Chapter 3 describes the methodology, detailing what data was collected during the field work and how, including an overview of participants involved. The geographical and historical context of the research is expanded upon in Chapter 4. As a case study, this information acts as crucial data and some initial analysis is provided where relevant. Maps and figures further clarify the research locality.

Chapter 5 represents the bulk of the research, delving into the challenges and opportunities faced by the newcomers in this rural part of France. The particularities of this case are supplemented with participant testimonies; the NGO-volunteer disconnect, perceptions of newcomers, and specific locality characteristics are depicted and critically analysed. Best practices to be taken from this research, as well as its limitations, are considered.

Finally, the research is concluded in Chapter 6 with a brief summary, elaborates on the questions at hand, and reflections on potential further research. Ultimately, the research finds that despite some genuine successes with and potential for newcomer emplacement in this shrinking rural area, there remain significant issues to address in multiple key domains. Initiatives pertaining to challenges faced by both locals and newcomers are likely to garner the most support and would contribute to changing misperceptions between the groups. Livelihood improvement is feasible but not guaranteed and shifting the burden onto newcomers to revitalise struggling industries would be misplaced, unfair, and ineffective.

1.4. A note on terminology

The literature on migration does not always explicitly differentiate between the terms migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, exiled person, and newcomer. Policies tend to dictate different regulations

depending on which type of migrant someone is, and people's perceptions change significantly based on how someone is identified (De Coninck, 2019). On a more local level, these status differences are at best, meaningless and at worst, counterproductive to inclusion.

Despite the aim to use inclusive terminology, the label 'newcomers' is not without flaws. As De Coninck (2019: 15) aptly states, this term "does presume that all people with a migration background are 'new'." Categorising migrants does not necessarily reveal their motivations and experiences and may even inhibit integration efforts on some levels (De Coninck, 2019). People can be part of more than one category or have had vastly difference experiences and perceptions of events despite being on similar journeys.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to avoid labelling to some extent when discussing particular groups of people, however much it may seem to generalise a diverse population. The decision to use the term 'newcomers' in this research aligns with the intention to be as inclusive as possible and allow a more broad and comprehensive understanding of migration. It will refer to refugees, asylum seekers, exiled persons, and migrants. At times, for the sake of specificity and clarity, these individual terms are also used. Finally, there is the occasional use of the term 'people' instead – this is intentional, lest we forget that newcomers are, indeed, people too.

2. Theoretical embedding

This chapter delves into the existing literature and key concepts pertaining to the research, outlining the theoretical framework within which it is situated.

2.1. Rural shrinkage

Rural shrinkage is the continuous decline of rural areas. This can be seen either in decreasing population numbers as more people move away than move in, or in what is known as 'legacy shrinkage' (Copus, 2020). This refers to when absolute numbers are not necessarily decreasing, but the population is aging and there are fewer people of working age choosing to remain. Scholars recognise the vicious cycle of rural shrinkage, as more people move away due to a lack of skilled employment opportunities, decreasing demand leads to reductions in public services, causing further outmigration as quality of life within these towns decline (Tisdall, 2015; ESPON, 2020; García-Ariasa et al., 2021; Küpper et al., 2017). Figure 1 illustrates the relentless nature of this cycle.

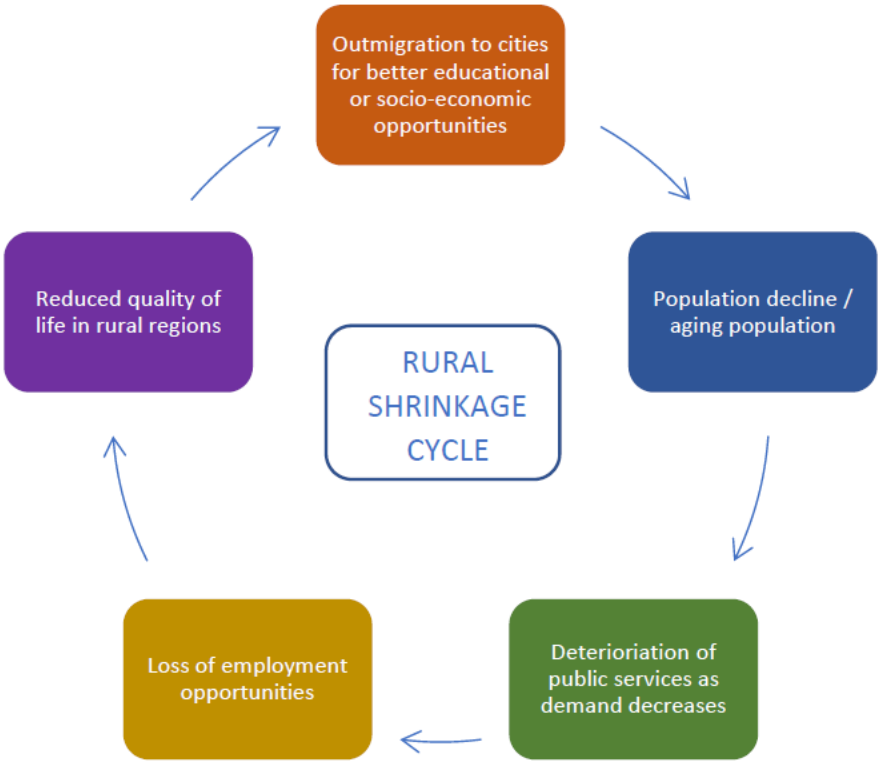

Figure 1: Rural shrinkage cycle (author's configuration, based on ESPON, 2020).

2.2. Newcomers in shrinking rural areas

Mitigating rural shrinkage means disrupting this cycle. Settling migrants who need a place to rebuild their lives in communities that are suffering consequences of a declining population has

strong potential to benefit both groups, as has been observed in previous research (Rabrenovic, 2007). However, Recaño (2017) notes that abundance of space and availability of housing for people to move into these areas does not necessarily translate into a desire to go there, especially if there is a pervasive lack of opportunities. Moreover, a one-size-fits-all approach to rural regions is unrealistic; departments fall under distinctive regional policies, and even neighbouring towns are characterised by different dynamics. Recaño (2017) also raised an important moral dilemma – is it ethical to resettle people in areas facing deprivation, adverse employment prospects, and increasing out-migration? It begs the question of why newcomers would be interested in living there when even the locals are not. Nevertheless, it has and will continue to be implemented as a resettlement and redispersal strategy, and thus necessitates research to scrutinise it.

Previous studies combing the focus of rural revitalisation with migrant emplacement are limited in number. Those that have advise that local community involvement is key – with active participation and collective efforts, success of these projects is much more likely (Tardis, 2019). Addressing rural shrinkage has often taken the form of "counteracting shrinkage" or "accepting shrinkage" (Hospers, 2013). Facilitating migrant emplacement in these places would fall under the counteracting category, as these initiatives aim to actively reverse the trend of declining rural areas. The response strategy in any one locality depends on its particular characteristics, needs, and dynamics. Pinilla & Sáez (2021) point out that it is crucial to have a thorough understanding of what residents themselves want in order to determine the most suitable approach; any action without the locals' informed support is undoubtedly more challenging.

Advocating for opening up rural communities as places of reception for newcomers risks unintentionally linking the decision to accept those seeking asylum to the presumption that they can provide a return for the towns' 'investment'. People who are displaced by force should not have to prove themselves to be 'good' or 'productive' in order to be worthy of refuge. On this, Bose (2021: 17) raises a fundamental point: he considers whether "the tropes of 'refugees-as-saviours' for smaller communities posit the refugee as inherently more deserving or legitimate than undocumented immigrants." This adds an important, and perhaps overlooked, perspective to debates on the possibilities that resettlement bring to shrinking rural towns. From academics to NGO workers to local advocates, the discourse around newcomers must be treaded with caution on this front.

Integration of refugees and other exiled persons in new communities has been of interest to those researching ways people can establish meaningful connections and build lives with a sense of stability. There is debate between the appropriateness of the concepts of 'inclusion' versus 'integration' in migration research. Integration has been interpreted in a plethora of ways: Bolt,

Ozuekren, and Phillips describe it as "a process whereby the differences between ethnic / racial groups and the reference population gradually decline across a range of domains" (2010: 173). Chen and Wang highlight one definition as a "policy goal for projects aimed at facilitating the settlement of immigrants and refugees" (2015: 420). Esser suggested it was "above all a process of adaptation and personal change of the migrants themselves, which enhances their inclusion" (Esser, 2001, as cited in Meier, 2018: 125). The concept of integration, as well as the diverse takes on its meaning, have received considerable criticism. Meier (2018) rejects the idea of a homogenous European society into which newcomers could blend, while Gestring (2014) aptly argues that European cities are characterised by their diversity, and it is unrealistic and unnecessary to expect someone to be able to change to fit in seamlessly. Wessendorf and Phillimore echoes this criticism, suggesting that it "places the onus on migrants to become part of a society", despite the increasingly diverse nature of such societies (2019: 127). While predominantly referring to those settling in cities, it is equally applicable to those moving to rural areas, which are also increasingly made up of a multitude of ethnicities, statuses, and backgrounds.

In discussions on integration, Ager and Strang often make an appearance. Their conceptual framework aims to allow for a comprehensive analysis of the integration of newcomers, dictating ten interdependent domains within four themes to do so. These include Markers and Means (employment, housing, education, health), Social Connection (bridges, bonds, links), Facilitators (language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability), and Foundation (rights and citizenship) (Ager & Strang, 2008: 170). Rather than seeking to strictly define what integration entails, their objective was rather to identify "commonalities in perceptions" of what makes it successful (Ager & Strang, 2008: 167). It is the point of departure for much of the literature surrounding debates on integration due to its applicable nature across time and contexts. It is a rejection of the notion that integration can be achieved on any meaningful level through just one domain, and instead promotes the conception that it is precisely the interrelation of multiple domains that can facilitate a successful experience.

In contrast, **social inclusion** does not imply a disappearance of differences between groups and is about more than economic engagement – rather, it entails participation in civic and political processes, networking, cultural identity and social interaction (Andrade & Doolin, 2016). In short, social inclusion is "the extent that individuals…are able to fully participate in society and control their own destinies" (Warschauer, 2003: 8). It is not just done *for* people – inclusion is a continuous process done *by* newcomers and locals alike, taking peoples' agency into account. While it goes beyond blending in and minimising differences, this concept still implies the need to fit in with that which is already existing, rather than creating something in their newfound environment.

2.3. Emplacement

It is for these criticisms that this research evokes the concept of **emplacement**. Aptly described by Çağlar (2016: 10), emplacement is the process by which a newcomer builds "networks of connection within the constraints and opportunities of a specific locality at a particular time". There is a strong emphasis on the particular context in which one is operating and the opportunities or constraints that provides, as well as the idea that "all individuals live within, as they create, a social nexus composed of all those to whom they are connected by various forms of interaction" (Giddens, 1984, as cited in Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2013). It is an ongoing, highly contextual, dynamic creation of the environment in which one is situated – building a new community instead of attempting to assimilate into the original one. Shifting the focus to small-scale, local relations across common domains allows a different understanding of what it means to create new dynamics within a given environment, instead of being preoccupied with overarching "distinctions between co-ethnics and majority residents" (Wessendorf & Phillimore, 2019: 128; Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016). While such distinctions are not entirely irrelevant, there remains unpredictable overlap and hidden commonalities between them that could be enlightening if given sufficient analytical attention.

Community engagement in such inclusion activities has been recognised as crucial in their success, and for rural areas, subsequent revitalisation (Hospers, 2013; Tietjen & Jørgensen, 2016). Establishing meaningful relationships between locals and newcomers has been found to be a difficult process, especially if cultural differences create divisions; supportive and community-based initiatives allow for "real dialogue across difference and the development of relationships based on shared goals and equality" (Daley, 2007: 158). In this sense, involvement of organised actors such as NGOs or volunteers seems imperative to facilitate contact. Others suggest that active participation and inclusion may be compromised by power dynamics between volunteers and newcomers (Rast & Ghorashi, 2018). While tensions and barriers may exist in the initial stages of community engagement, one study in France recognised that "in small communities, it is easier to change your mind" (Tardis, 2019).

There are a multitude of studies highlighting the challenges of newcomers – both migrants by choice and those who were forcibly displaced – in successfully settling in shrinking rural towns. Research details the widely recognised obstacles such as the limited employment opportunities available, learning the local language, access to basic services and facilities, and transferring professional and educational qualifications to the new country (Fonesca, 2008; Natale et al., 2019). The absence of a cultural community to provide support and inclusion and as well as an extreme lack of mobility are also identified as key impediments to establishing a quality life in rural areas;

as Uteng argues, “constrained mobility [is] a constitutive factor of social exclusion” (Uteng, 2009: 1057). In collating research based in the US, Bose adds that the unfamiliarity between natives and newcomers may raise concerns for practicalities, including “support for [other] languages…in the school system, trauma counselling that is culturally appropriate, or political representation” (2021: 4).

It is apparent that the process of newcomers moving into rural areas is inherently political in nature, particularly with regards to refugees and asylum seekers. The French government has increasingly decentralised its asylum procedure and services, allocating responsibilities to regional authorities and NGOs. Gardesse and Lelévrie (2020) indicate that while it is still heavily managed from the top down, specific policy coordination and implementation is delegated to various agencies. While allowing space for varying local dynamics is fundamental, when these government-sourced NGOs and agencies are not adequately funded, the consequences reverberate at the local level. Challenges of understaffing or unqualified employees link directly back to the state as the facilitator of these programmes, yet blame is predominantly directed towards the organisations themselves. Gardesse and Lelévrie (2020) further suggest that civil society ends up engaging particularly in areas which face inadequate support by local authorities and NGOs. That’s not to suggest these organisations should be immune from criticism, but rather to acknowledge that the root of these issues often stem from further up the political hierarchy.

What is striking about the literature on this subject is that key challenges presented decades ago precisely mirror those which we see today; this raises questions on the efforts and prioritisation (or lack thereof) of these elements on a political level.

2.4. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework in Figure 2 displays the linkages between the concepts discussed that are most relevant to the research. Visualising these theoretical elements allows a clearer understanding of how they are related and sets an understanding of how this research will be approached. The concept of Rural Shrinkage in the given case study location sets the parameters in which all other mechanisms are situated. Having initially considered Newcomers and Natives to be two distinct categories, the research found that a sharp division between these groups was not an accurate portrayal; the conceptual framework was adjusted accordingly to illustrate this crossover. The nuances of this convergence will be elaborated on in the discussion.

Revitalisation and emplacement are linked as two ongoing challenges that are seeking durable solutions. Inclusion is understood as the potential gateway to a solution for both, with Community Engagement involving both local natives and newcomers as they face Shared Challenges in a

participatory manner. The concepts of Revitalisation and Emplacement manifest as a result of these processes, which reap outcomes such as community building, long-term population expansion, job production, new commercial activities, increased social networking, and an improved quality of life. The ongoing nature of these outcomes continuously contributes to the revitalisation of rural areas, as well as the emplacement practices between newcomers and natives in the area.

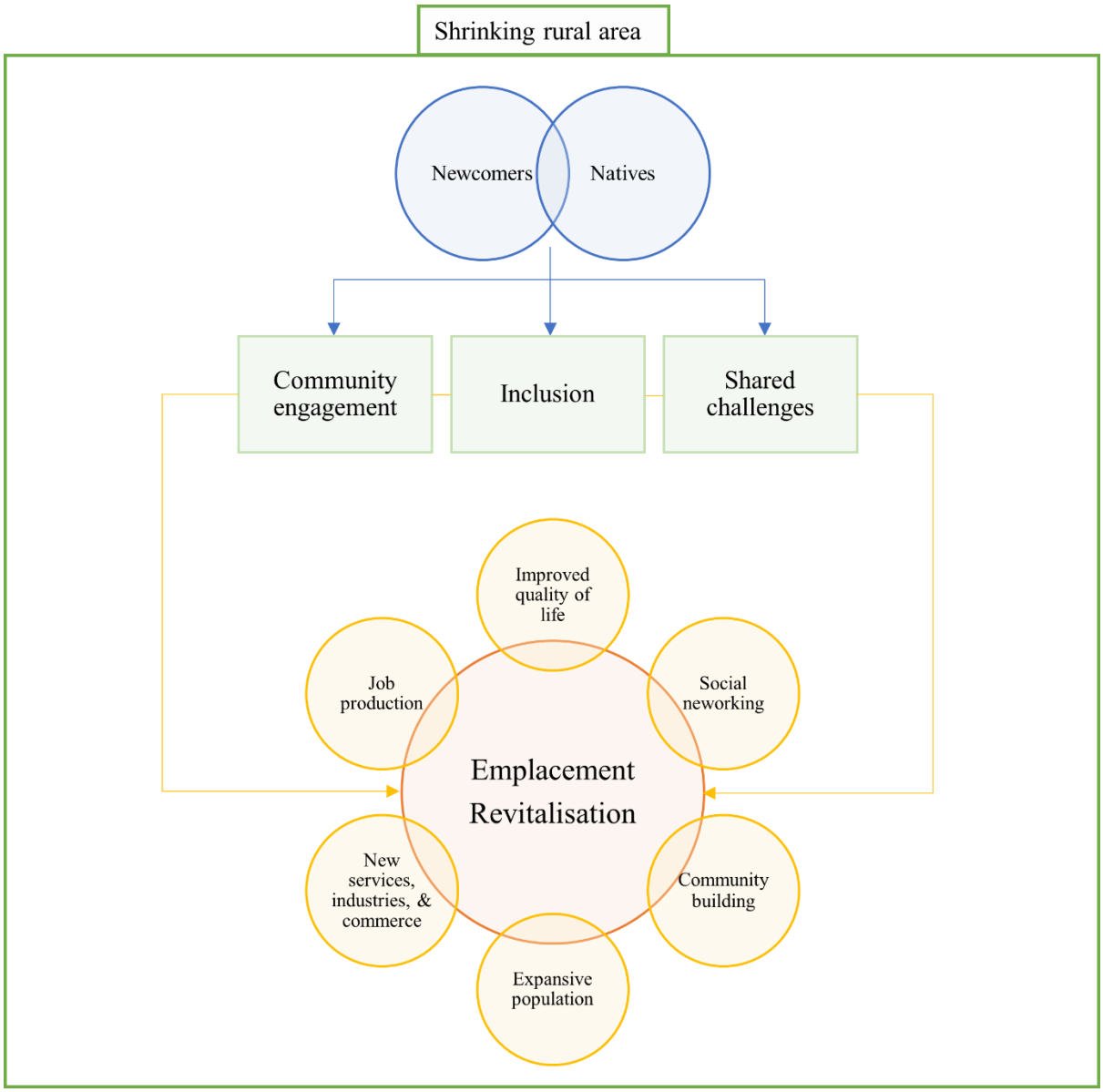

Figure 2: Conceptual framework (author's configuration).

3. Methodology

This research took the form of a case study, as a core objective was to discover small scale, informal best practices that could inform other rural towns of potentially effective approaches to welcoming newcomers. Its value lies in the particular insights obtained through understanding a range of perspectives within the selected localities.

3.1. Primary data

During the four-week data collection period in April and May 2022, I aimed to get a participant sample that was as representative as possible of the towns. I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews, both face to face and by telephone, with locals, newcomers (refugees and migrants), NGO representatives, local government officials, and volunteers in and around the region. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, with some being recorded when consent was obtained. Interview protocol entailed open-ended questions around participants' own perceptions and experiences. Valuable data also came in the shape of informal conversations with migrants, locals, refugees, and market vendors who weren't necessarily living in those towns; the information and anecdotes they shared supported certain findings or prompted new investigations. Following these interviews and conversations, those which were recorded were transcribed and translated if necessary. Transcripts and interview notes were then coded manually to identify common themes raised among participants.

Observation of (and participation in) a French lesson for refugees, including a Congolese and Ukrainian family allowed real insight into the practical functioning of these initiatives, as well as the habitual challenges they faced. I also conducted an online survey to reach out to community members about their thoughts on the challenges and advantages of living in this rural area, changes they have discerned over the years, and their perceptions of newcomers in the region.

Most locals that were interviewed or spoken to informally considered themselves 'neo-ruraux' or 'neo-Creusois', meaning they were not originally from the rural Creuse department (compared to the 'Creusois', or people whose families have often lived here for generations). Some were of immigrant descent, with a large Turkish population in the region and smaller communities of other nationalities – particularly anglophone. Others came from bigger cities such as Paris as part of a growing trend of movement into the countryside.

Table 1 indicates the general description of interview participants. The newcomer-native crossover is not illustrated here for the sake of clarity. However, it is worth remembering that there are French natives who are considered (by themselves and others) as newcomers. Moreover, most volunteers

and local government representatives are also locals, but the locals category is distinguished as people who are entirely uninvolved in any resettlement, policymaking, or integration processes.

Interview Participants		
Newcomers	Refugees	5
	Migrants	3
Natives	Locals	3
	Volunteers	6
	NGO representatives	3
	Local government representatives	3
		Total: 23

Table 1: Research participants (author's configuration).

3.2. Secondary data

Secondary data was largely used in the run up to the data collection to inform location selections, provide a contextual backdrop to the research, and guide the interview questions. Sources included media articles, demographic data from INSEE, NGO publications, volunteer organisation documents, national and regional policy reports, and academic articles.

3.3. Sampling strategy

The final two localities selected were narrowed down from several featuring similar demographic trends in various departments across France. The criteria for choosing them entailed a consistently decreasing population, an aging population, an increasing number of vacant housing, and ongoing initiatives to resettle refugees and welcome newcomers. The French demographic statistics website INSEE was used to compile this data. Local media sources proved valuable with news reports covering stories of refugees being received in certain towns or the specific integration initiatives being trialled within local organisations.

Having identified the two towns of Aubusson and Felletin from the outset, going to the region and speaking to locals made clear the inextricable connections between the two. While there are different dynamics, populations, and politics at play, it did not make sense to study one without the other. People living in these towns, separated by a mere 10 kilometres, often go between the two for work, school, socialising, or the renowned weekly markets.

Interview participants were reached by using the snowballing method, having had no prior-established local contacts before arriving. The strong volunteer network in these communities made

outreach straightforward once initiated. I connected to some through a direct approach, including making appointments with the mayor's office and speaking to newcomers working at the local market. Finally, by posting a survey in a local Facebook group I reached 30 participants. Of those, two agreed to be interviewed further, enabling me to contact people outside of the connections I made in person. To preserve participants' anonymity, all names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

The survey was an intentional effort to offset the possibility of speaking only to participants who share the same network and general beliefs, an almost inevitable limitation of the snowballing method. While interviews with volunteers were an extremely valuable contribution to the research, it was also important to include the perspectives of those who are not heavily involved with receiving and supporting newcomers. Most data still came from the interviews, but nonetheless the addition of the survey responses provided a more comprehensive range of viewpoints.

3.4. Validity, reliability, and suitability

This research method resulted in relatively high reliability. Interviewing participants with diverse backgrounds and who play different roles (if any) in newcomers' experiences in these towns allowed a wide range of perspectives to be illustrated in the research. The general results align strongly with previous research conducted in similar environments, while findings specific to Aubusson and Felletin were reiterated by multiple participants from distinct networks. The interview guide provided a level of consistency in the questions and topics that were covered.

That said, in seeking to thoroughly understand peoples' perspectives and the potential of these towns to facilitate positive experiences, it ultimately could be improved by conducting more interviews. The validity of the research, while sound, could have benefitted from a longer field work period to connect with more people and better gage the impact.

While qualitative research comes with its drawbacks, ultimately it was the most effective way to obtain extensive, case-specific data, further supplemented with quantitative data through desk research and surveys. This research sought real experiences and stories – it is about more than numbers, and individual interviews helped illustrate that. The chosen method was suitable to ensure the presence of depth and human voices next to the faceless statistics to which so many are accustomed.

3.5. Limitations

This research is not without its limitations. Despite being a mixed methods study, the strong focus on qualitative elements risks trying to generalise success stories of individual cases that may not be fully applicable elsewhere (Küpper et al., 2017). These places each have unique characteristics, with different settings and actors involved that will define the potential for success within these

resettlement and revitalisation projects. Understanding and discussing general processes and recognising the "bigger socio-spatial picture" (Milbourne, 2007: 382) is key in providing useful, applicable research.

While efforts were made to reach out to a variety of locals and newcomers to ensure a representative sample, many participants were found through the snowballing method and thus shared a common network and views with one another. In efforts to avoid this and get a comprehensive understanding of the experiences here, I also posted a survey on a local Facebook group in which anonymous participants answered short answer questions about their rural town and their perceptions of newcomers. In hindsight, the survey terminology should have been more specific. By asking about newcomers, people tended to think of young French city-dwellers moving to the countryside. I was interested in also understanding perceptions of refugees and other types of migrants as well, but that was not present in the responses.

Refugees and asylum seekers in the towns come from all corners of the world – whether it's Afghanistan, the Congo, Ivory Coast, Sudan, Syria, or Ukraine – there was an immense diversity in these small towns. Getting in touch with them was a challenge without first connecting through a local volunteer. Moreover, not all had sufficient levels in French or English to be interviewed, so only a select few made up the participants from this group. This presents a parallel limitation – only interviewing people who had sufficient levels of French or English omits the viewpoint of those who have no common language whatsoever with locals, which would undoubtedly heighten the difficulties faced on arrival. Locals, particularly the volunteers, spoke some English so it is possible to communicate on a basic level with newcomers who have English language competencies.

3.6. Positionality

As someone who is not local to the town, or even native to the country, I had a very different background to many of those with whom I spoke. This may have influenced the extent to which people were willing to speak on certain topics, especially with regards to potentially controversial opinions. On the other hand, others admitted to being able to speak more openly with someone from outside the area, as they were not always comfortable discussing their grievances about the country with the French people who had welcomed them there. I was conscious of encouraging participants to speak openly and intentionally reserved any judgements or comparisons.

4. Geographical, historical, and political framework

Context is fundamental – it drives comparability. This section contextualises the case study at the national, regional, and local level. Case study results are inherently specific and ungeneralisable; understanding the context in which emplacement and revitalisation mechanisms took place allows for a modicum of extrapolation.

4.1. National context:

4.1.1. Asylum in France

As the largest country in the EU with significant political influence, the second largest economy, and an incredibly diverse geography bordering eight European countries, France plays a key role in EU affairs (Tardis, 2019). While not under the same pressure as Germany or Italy in terms of the influx of refugees, France has made major commitments to resettle thousands of people seeking asylum from crises around the globe. It is taking a leadership role on this front, meaning research into how resettlement operations can be successful are even more vital in this context. As part of its Resettlement Scheme, it reached 98 percent of its target of resettling 10,000 people across 2018 and 2019 (Ambassade de France, 2019; Romano, 2018). France subsequently committed to resettle 5,000 people in 2022, having missed that same target in 2020 and 2021 (Delbos, 2022; UNHCR, 2022). Figure 3 illustrates this significant drop in resettlement departures.

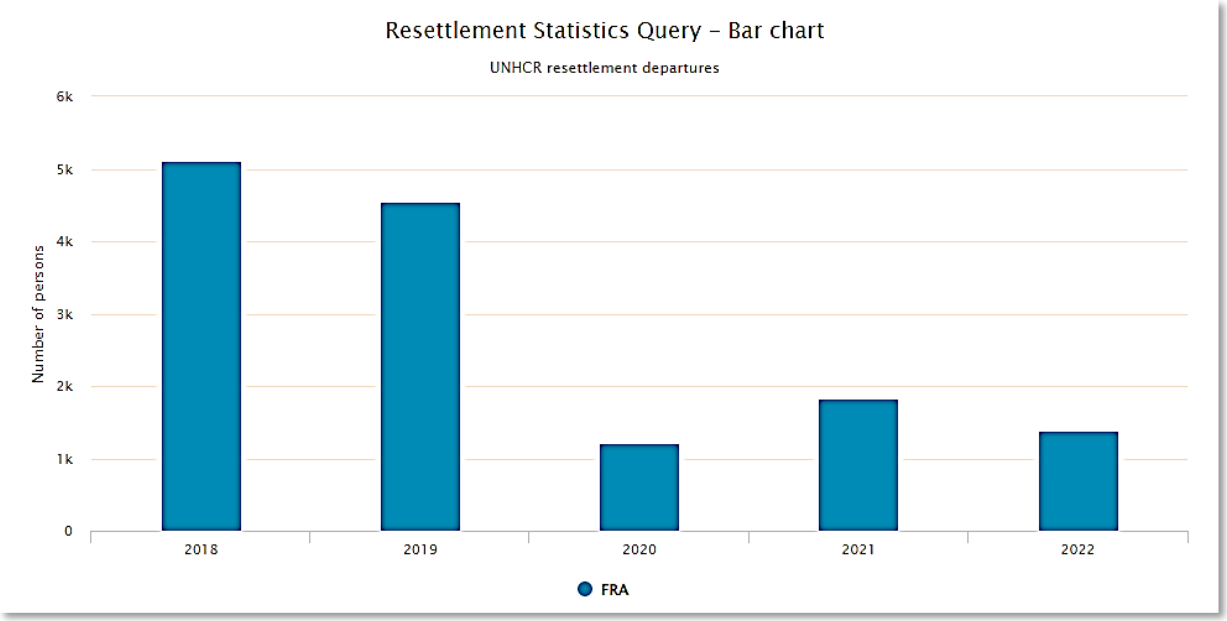

Figure 3: France resettlement statistics (UNHCR, 2022).

Resettlement refers to the process through which people living in refugee camps in other countries are specifically interviewed and selected for international protection in France by the UNHCR. They are subsequently accompanied to France with immediate access to refugee status and sent to the accommodation allocated to them by the government and relevant NGO. This differs to the

procedure for those who arrive in France without a predetermined status, who must register and wait for their asylum application to be processed (UNHCR, 2018).

There were 121,554 registered asylum seekers in France in 2021, as recorded by the Ministry of Interior (Delbos, 2022).[1] With the exception of 2020, during which the COVID-19 pandemic led to an anomalous drop in asylum applications across Europe, the number has been increasing annually. The lack of reception capacity in France has led to the state looking for solutions to avoid the homelessness and rights violations prevalent among asylum seekers and refugees, including by financing more reception centres and facilities in all regions across the country. In 2021, only just over half – 56 percent – of eligible asylum seekers were properly accommodated (Delbos, 2022).

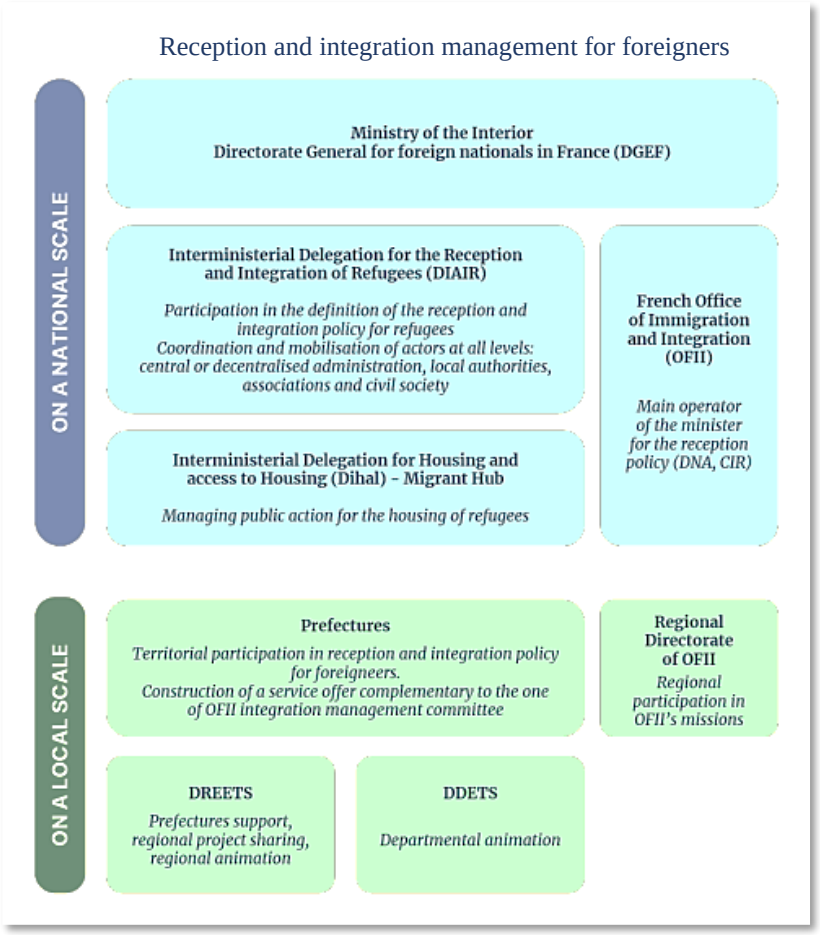

Figure 4: Details of the governmental actors for reception and integration at the national and local level (Share SIRA, 2022).

With a 'national plan for reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees' implemented for 2021-2023, the key focuses pertained to improving accommodation facilities and support for these newcomers (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2020), as well as dispersing them more widely across

[1] This statistic may vary depending on which government body registers the individual, how their status is recorded based on the procedure through which they arrived, or whether they have previously applied for asylum.

the country to lessen the pressure on major cities – particularly Paris. In the region Nouvelle Aquitaine, the pre-pandemic number of asylum requests represented about four percent of the total in metropolitan France; the more proportional dispersal target under the current national plan would mean the region taking on nine percent of the share (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2020). In early 2022, the Ministry of Interior called for integration project proposals; the same initiative the previous year saw 49 projects chosen and funded on a budget of four million euros. The AGIR programme beginning in 2022 in several departments demonstrated the intentions of the government to make access to housing and employment more systematic on a departmental scale, with the aim to eventually expand the programme nationwide (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2021).

As detailed in Figure 4, there is a plethora of actors involved at each stage of the asylum, resettlement, and reception processes in France. OFII (French Office of Immigration and Integration) is the most visible government body in day-to-day life for refugees and asylum seekers, as they are responsible for the reception procedures at a national and regional level. They set financial aid allowances, determine which asylum seekers are prioritised for accommodation, and coordinate the compulsory language classes (Share SIRA, 2022). The asylum procedure itself is incredibly complex; asylum seekers, often with minimal French language skills, are expected to navigate this process either alone or with some assistance from the associated government agencies and NGOs. With recent the enactment of the Temporary Protection Directive, certain asylum seekers were able to bypass this taxing process to quickly access refugee status and its associated support mechanisms.

4.1.2. Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent influx of Ukrainians into other European countries added pressure to an already struggling asylum system. In response, the European Council triggered the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for the first time since its adoption in 2001, allowing the provision of immediate measures of protection and reception for refugees (European Commission, 2022). France implementing this directive into its national legal framework meant Ukrainians arriving in the country were allocated renewable residence permits, instant access to employment and healthcare, family reunification rights, and monetary allowances (Delbos, 2022; AIDA, 2022). Some rights granted to Ukrainian refugees under this mechanism are not accessible to asylum seekers following the normal procedure; this creates a distinctive asylum experience for Ukrainians as well as sentiments of inequity by other refugees and their advocates.

Another novel element to this asylum procedure is the offering of accommodation through private citizens on a large, widespread scale. Combined with the facilities organised by the state, 100,000 places were made available specifically for Ukrainians (Delbos, 2022). Moreover, by the beginning

of April, 600 companies had put forward 7,000 job offers via a dedicated online portal for these newcomers, signifying an unprecedented mobilisation by both the state and citizens (Le Parisien, 2022). This differentiation in reception conditions adds an interesting dimension to this research, as well as a particular context in which people are more acutely aware of refugees in their communities or the challenges that the asylum process entails.

4.1.3. Nation-wide rural shrinkage

Rural shrinkage in France, and even in Europe more broadly, has taken place for decades (Tisdall, 2015). Data from the World Bank indicates a declining trend in the rural population of France since at least the 1960s (World Bank, 2020). The phenomenon is not new, but its consequences are more costly than ever before. ESPON (2020: 2) proposes several socio-economic processes as responsible for rural shrinkage, including: "economic restructuring, locational disadvantage, peripherisation, and disruptive events or political transitions". The combination and interaction of these elements contribute to an overall decline in rural areas that is often difficult to reverse. Several regions in France, particularly in the centre, are predicted to continue in their trend of population decline for at least the next decade (ESPON, 2020). Moreover, some parts of the country (at the NUTS 3 level) are characterised by a predominantly negative natural change rather than that of net-migration. Creuse is distinguished in this analysis as being highly affected – upwards of -12 percent – by negative natural change (ESPON, 2020: 11).

In France, 88 percent of municipalities representing 33 percent of the population are classified as rural according to the national statistics bureau INSEE, either as sparsely populated or very sparsely populated (D'Alessandro, Levy, & Regnier, 2021). These areas typically have average incomes lower than that of urban areas, with greater proportions of the rural population living below the poverty line.

4.2. Regional context:

4.2.1. Creuse and the 'empty diagonal'

More specifically, this research will analyse cases in rural France in which refugees have been resettled and are working to establish a new life within local communities. It takes place in the department of Creuse, which lies within the larger region of Nouvelle Aquitaine. Creuse is second most rural, sparsely populated department of mainland France, situated centrally in the 'diagonale du vide' (INSEE, 2018). The 'diagonale du vide', or empty diagonal, refers to the cross section of France going from the Northeast to the Southwest.

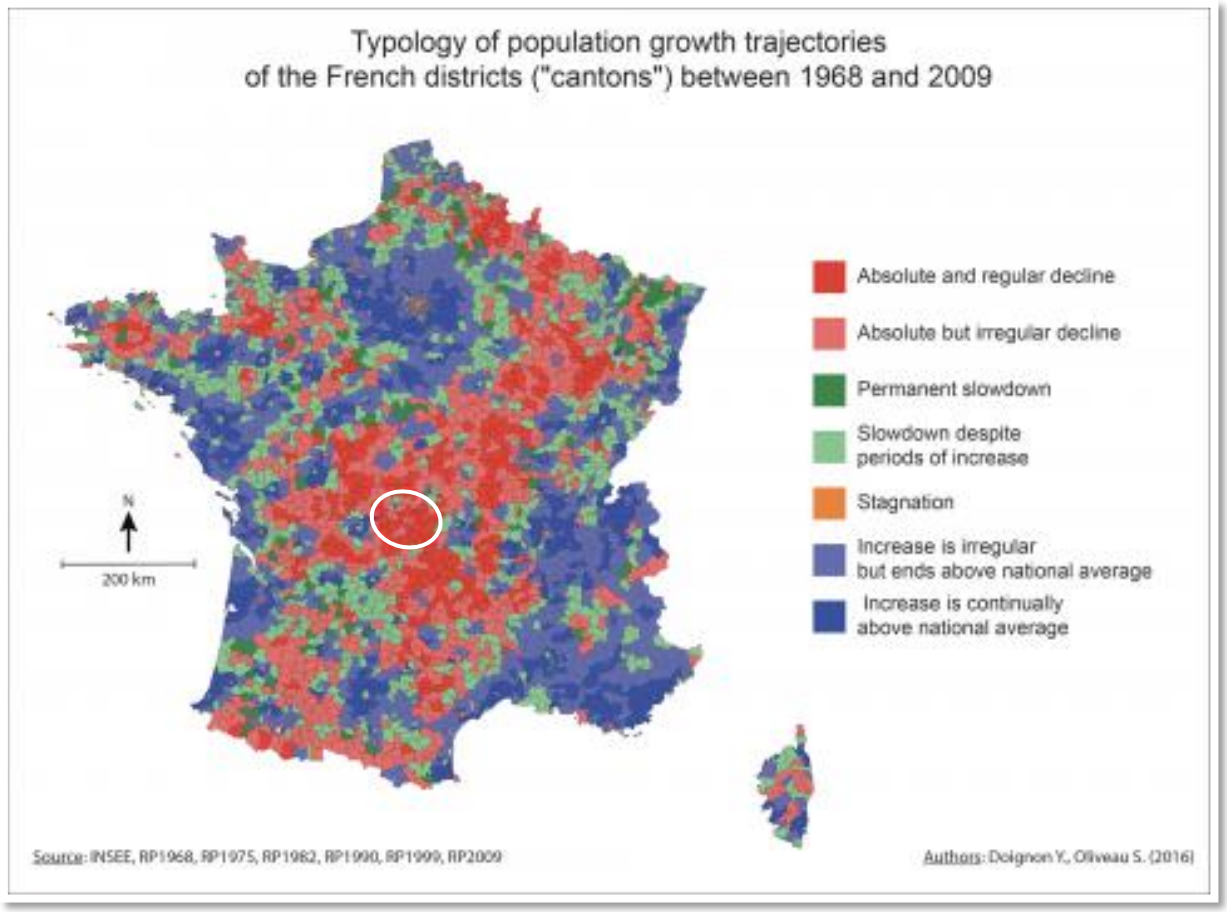

Figure 5: Empty diagonal, population at the district level (Oliveau & Doignon, 2016).

Its striking name originates from the low population density that extends somewhat continuously from the Ardennes to the Pyrenees, even stretching across Spain (Oliveau & Doignon, 2016). Regions within the diagonal, while subject to variation and inconsistencies, have observed a notable population decline for decades. Some positive fluctuations in these populations are not necessarily indicative of revitalisation, especially when growth is due to the in-migration of retirees (Pistre, 2011). As Oliveau and Doignon (2016) point out, "we can doubt the sustainability of this population growth in the coming decades. It would seem more appropriate to speak of a rebound than a renewal". Figure 5 illustrates the districts in France having faced a decades-long decline in

population, with the general trajectory of a Northeast-to-Southwest diagonal formed. The department of Creuse is circled in black, centrally located within the frame of the diagonal and coloured predominantly in dark red, indicating an absolute and regular decline in population between 1968 and 2009 (Oliveau & Doignon, 2016).

INSEE details demographic data for all departments and communes in France and indicates that Creuse has been experiencing shrinkage for over a century (Lemasson, 2021; Bonnet, 2019). The population now stands around 116,617; there is a perpetual out-migration of young people and consequently, the overall population is aging steadily. The mortality rate has consistently been almost double the birth rate since the 1970s (INSEE, 2022c). In line with the declining population, the number of jobs is also diminishing, despite the positive trend seen in the wider region of Nouvelle-Aquitaine (Lemasson, 2021).

Les enfants de la Creuse

While this part of France has typically received little in-migration relative to the rural exodus it continues to experience, there are some notable instances which remain important to its history. 'Les enfants de la Creuse', meaning the children of Creuse, refer to the 2,015 Réunionese children brought into rural regions by the French authorities in an attempt to repopulate rural areas (Roger, 2018). This scandal spanning from 1962 to 1984 took advantage of destitute families in Réunion, misled them into signing papers agreeing to the deportation of their children, and placed the young children in adoptive families under guise of being orphans (Gauvin & Vitale, 2021; Wimbush, 2018). Having only been recently acknowledged by the government who accepted its moral responsibility for the harm caused to these children and families, those who live in the region are acutely aware of this controversial attempt to counter the population decline.

4.2.2. Economy

In line with its rurality, the economy of Creuse has a strong basis in agriculture, accounting for over 13 percent of all employers in the department (Dumont & Guilloux, 2018; INSEE, 2022c). High numbers of self-employed are visible in Aubusson and Felletin; business creations have been on the rise for the past few years, having previously been in decline (INSEE, 2022). That said, unemployment in this region is higher than the national average. According to INSEE, while in Creuse it hovered at 12.3 percent in 2019, Aubusson saw unemployment rates reach 19.7 percent and Felletin hit 13.1 percent.[2] One in four people were living below the poverty threshold in Aubusson at that time, versus just under one in five in the wider Creuse department (INSEE, 2022c;

[2] These INSEE unemployment statistics use data from the census, rather than just those registered at Pole Emploi (the French public employment service). Of the two, census data documents higher unemployment rates.

Ville Data, 2022). Without detracting from the difficulty of this situation, lower living costs in this region perhaps allow for those living on low incomes to have slightly higher living standards than the urban poor. Non-EU immigrants are significantly more likely to face unemployment, and consequently, poverty, than French citizens or EU immigrants (Safi, 2014).

4.3. Local context:

The small towns of Aubusson and Felletin were selected to analyse newcomer-local dynamics and potential opportunities for both groups. Situated in Creuse and a mere 10 kilometres apart, it's worth detailing the specificities of these two places before delving into a common analysis of their emplacement capacities.

Figure 6 pinpoints Aubusson and Felletin on the map of France, within the department of Creuse. They are located equidistance from the two larger cities of Limoges and Clermont-Ferrand – 88 kilometres East and West, respectively.

Figure 6: Map of France indicating Aubusson & Felletin in the Creuse department (Google Maps, 2022).

4.3.1. Characteristics

Aubusson is the larger of the two, with the most up to date census indicating a population of 3,248 people (INSEE, 2022). With a consistent downward curve in the population since the 1970s, this reflects the simultaneous trends of decreasing birth rates and increasing death rates. As a historic

tapestry town, it once hosted upwards of 7,000 people, with the start of the 20th century seeing up to 2,000 of them engaged in the tapestry sector alone. This renowned industry, with a place on the UNESCO World Heritage list for Intangible Cultural Heritage, now only accounts for the employment of around 120 people (UNESCO, 2009; Vernieres, 2011; CIT, 2019).

Felletin has a smaller population of 1,550 (INSEE, 2022b), yet demonstrates identical trends in terms of its decreasing, aging population contributing to rural shrinkage. It also takes pride in the historical tapestry industry that Aubusson has now become synonymous with. With some fluctuation, both towns have seen a general increase in vacant housing for at least the last 50 years (INSEE, 2022).

Figure 7: Vacant properties, abandoned or for sale in Aubusson. In the centre, a sign advertises the sale a local bakery (author's photos).

Politically, many rural and aging areas follow the trend of voting for more right-wing representatives (Codet-Boisse, Abalo, & Rongere, 2021). In the April 2022 presidential elections, the department of Creuse saw far-right Marine Le Pen coming out on top of the first round, while centre-right Emmanuel Macron surpassed her in the second. Voting statistics from this election showed that, typically, the smaller the municipality, the more likely they were to vote far right (Legrand, 2022). Aubusson and Felletin, however, are anomalies in this widespread rural phenomenon. Both towns voted for left-wing candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon in the first round of presidential elections, followed by Macron in the final round (Linternaute, 2022). Interestingly, the legislative elections for the National Assembly in June 2022 resulted in a left-wing candidate being elected for the department (Le Monde, 2022). Aubusson and Felletin both voted for left-wing candidates in the 2020 municipal elections.

The political angle of these regions is important to note, particularly in the context of receiving newcomers. Accepting to host refugees is on a voluntary basis at the municipal level; with

Aubusson and Felletin representing two of the only towns in Creuse to do so speaks to their political persuasion. The local volunteer collectives established in Felletin and Aubusson to support vulnerable groups further add to their welcoming image.

4.3.2. Why here?

Municipalities accepting to host refugees do so in coordination with the prefecture of the department. Each department has a quota for how many refugees and asylum seekers they should accept in order for the country to maintain a balanced dispersal and ensure cities such as Paris are not overburdened (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2020). The vast majority of refugees and asylum seekers present themselves for registration and subsequent support in the capital. Consequently, resources are strained for both newcomers and locals, and many are faced with homeless and destitution in an environment that does not have the capacity to support them.

Following the influx of thousands of people seeking refuge in Europe, Aubusson proposed to welcome refugees in 2015 – one of the first in Creuse to do so (Abalo, 2015; David & Maligorne, 2015). This refugee reception crisis prompted municipalities across the country to step forward to play a role in the welcoming of these newcomers. With a local property owner offering their vacant accommodation to host a couple families, this became feasible in Aubusson.

Figure 8: Aubusson (author's photo).

Having committed to resettle 7,000 Syrians and 3,000 sub-Saharan Africans from refugee camps over the course of 2018 and 2019, 49 families were initially hosted in Creuse, four of which were sent to Aubusson (Rapegno, 2018; UNHCR, 2018). This rural department was not entirely unfamiliar with welcoming newcomers; CADAs had been built in a few towns across the region to accommodate asylum seekers waiting for decisions on their applications (Lulek, 2018). CADAs are Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers (Centre d'Accueil de Demandeurs d'Asile), constructed to house and support asylum seekers while they await the verdict of their application. The creation of associations and volunteer collectives followed the establishment of these reception centres, offering support in a multitude of ways.

Ministry of Interior decides which association will manage the resettlement and socio-professional integration of refugees in each department through a call for projects and subsequent selection process. In the case of Creuse, the NGO Viltaïs is currently responsible for helping to identify suitable accommodation for refugees and accompanying them for the 12 months following their arrival. This accompaniment pertains to administration, language, housing, education, employment, social integration, and other relevant support needs (Viltaïs, 2019). They also have a mandate to implement a professional integration project across several departments; with a €1.2 million budget, the scheme is directed towards 120 young refugees undertaking an eight-month training and professional immersion course (Jakubowicz, 2020). With a couple thousand unfilled jobs in Creuse, predominantly within the agriculture and construction sectors which tend to require manual labour, this project seeks to fill the gap in the workforce while providing job opportunities and experience to these newcomers (Jakubowicz, 2020). While initiatives seeking to open up the job market to people who typically struggle to access it are a positive development, there remains a problematic angle to it.

While some people may aspire to work in these sectors or simply aim to find a job regardless of the profession, others arrive with different ambitions and skills that could thrive elsewhere. Testimonies from refugees pursuing individual goals suggest a lack sufficient support and resources for personal projects that are not aligned with that of the organisation or local government agencies. While falling under one generalised category, the reality is that refugees and asylum seekers make up an extremely heterogenous group, with diverse backgrounds, interests, skills and capabilities.

Moreover, while this initiative may allow locals to recognise the undeniable economic value these newcomers can bring to the table, it has the potential to backfire. When people accept refugees on the basis that they take up unfilled jobs, the support for this resettlement is inherently tied to the need for labour. If this need dissipates, so might well the acceptance to welcome newcomers.

United they stand

Felletin made local headlines in 2018 when up to 150 people peacefully protested the deportation of Noordeen, a young undocumented Sudanese man being expelled under the Dublin procedure (Lulek, 2018; Milon, 2020). Having been warmly received along with three other young Sudanese men in nearby town Faux-la-Montagne for the previous eight months, locals strongly objected to his ordered return to Italy where he had initially had his fingerprints taken. These supporters demonstrated unyielding support and recognition of his efforts to learn French and participate in local community life (Rapegno, 2018). The protest faced major disruption when between 60 to 80 members of the national guard were called in to escort the young man out the back of the building, while locals were met with tear gas, forceful removals, and arrests (Lulek, 2018). Despite the prefecture's attempt to deport Noordeen, they ultimately relented, and he was allowed back to Creuse to officially apply for asylum. He was granted refugee status in 2020 and went on to pursue training to enter the healthcare profession as a nurse (Milon, 2020).

This story, both emotional and inspiring, is nonetheless an exception to the norm. That said – when the stars align to place newcomers who are relentlessly motivated to learn and engage, in the sphere of those who open both their doors and minds unreservedly to welcome someone with whom they have little in common – it is special, and it is worth talking about. These glimpses of hope, of what could be, are important in order to propel narratives of acceptance to the surface in a sea of increasingly negative rhetoric against people seeking refuge in Europe.

Welcoming newcomers in Aubusson and Felletin is now a relatively normalised part of life in these small rural towns. The question is not 'if' they will accept refugees, it is 'how many' and 'when'. This is not to minimise the challenges they have faced and continue to grapple with in receiving newcomers, but rather acknowledge that they appear determined to make it work and maintain support within the community to do so. This has not been the case for all municipalities who initially volunteered to host refugees. According to NGO representatives, despite the best of intentions, some rural towns with vacant accommodation available ended up being fundamentally unsuitable as reception locations. Extremely remote areas – those without public transport or nearby access to basic services and facilities – render people without a personal vehicle completely dependent on the good-will of those around them. Local volunteers or members of the local mayor's office are relied upon for any outings the newcomers may want to make – be that for basic necessities, appointments, or leisure. Not only is it frustrating for people who lose all autonomy in moving to an area distant and somewhat disconnected from the wider world, it is an unsustainable burden on those who try to support them.

5. Results and discussion

This chapter first presents overview of the main challenges and opportunities present in these towns. Then there is a more nuanced discussion on the connotation of being a newcomer, exposing the specific dynamics at play in this region, best practices and their potential transferability, the realities of integration and emplacement concepts, locals' perceptions of newcomers, and how this links to top-down policies.

5.1. Challenges

The following is a discussion of the obstacles of living in shrinking rural areas, most of which impact newcomers and natives alike. These represent barriers to the ability of these remote areas to successfully host newcomers, as well as newcomers' prospects to thrive in such environments. While previous literature has thoroughly identified many of these challenges, their inextricable nature with other findings makes them worth reiterating and re-examining.

5.1.1. Mobility and work

The people who live and work in rural towns are under no illusion about the difficulties of life in the countryside – despite the general appreciation for the hospitality of the locals, tranquil lifestyles, and natural beauty of the region, there was a clear understanding of the challenges of rural living. The most glaring obstacles faced by newcomers in the region were repeatedly named as transport and finding work. These issues also affect locals; however, they were more likely to own a car, live centrally, have contacts, and speak fluent French, all of which lessened the impact of these obstacles.

Most people who are resettled into this area want to leave at some point – often after the one-year support period covered by the NGO. From speaking to newcomers, particularly refugees, a key barrier to living in rural areas is mobility. Aubusson and Felletin are relatively well served by buses (e.g., Felletin has four bus lines), albeit sometimes unreliable, but in areas more remote there is often no public transport at all. Foreign driving licenses are not always able to be exchanged for French ones but obtaining a driving license is an extremely costly process, in both time and money.

Work in rural areas is hard to come by for all. Many locals own their own business and do not need to employ people, while others moving into the area are increasingly working remotely. Those who arrive with specific qualifications or expertise are unlikely to find relevant career opportunities. For jobs that are available, a minimum level of French is often required that newcomers cannot always meet immediately. These issues overlap in a frustrating cycle; access to transport could facilitate access to jobs, working could contribute to acquiring language skills, and language skills would make it easier to obtain a driving licence and navigate administrative tasks.

For people displaced by force who arrive without a secured refugee status or have their asylum requests rejected, these challenges are magnified. Not only do they live in perpetual fear of being caught and deported, they also lack access to the support provided by NGOs and live without rights equal to those around them. Being unable to work legally means they sometimes spend years without projects or activities to fill their day. This inevitably has knock-on implications for their ability to learn French, establish social connections, and support themselves and their family.

The specific projects set out by OFII or the NGO are prioritised when supporting refugees towards employment over that which these newcomers choose for themselves. They may provide important opportunities for newcomers to start working and participate more fully in society. However, some perceive these 'opportunities' simply as the work that French people don't want to do.

"We are actually a resource for them." – Khalid, refugee

"They try to make refugee people do what they need, not what refugees need." – Abdel, refugee

The projects set out by the NGOs often have jobs involving physical labour, and many people are not interested in this type of work. A couple participants suggested that there was a lack of consideration for individual aspirations and abilities; there was a kind of one-size-fits-all attitude. They recall either being actively discouraged from the education routes they wanted to pursue or not being properly informed, meaning they did not have sufficient information to apply for themselves. If an organisation, or the government body funding them, is approaching resettlement and redispersal as a problem-solving mechanism (whether for repopulating shrinking towns or filling jobs in need of a workforce), it overlooks the agency of individuals in deciding what they want to do, their strengths that could contribute in other fields, and their personal interests and ambitions.

5.1.2. Language

Language abilities remain a major obstacle for most newcomers, particularly refugees and asylum seekers. Speak the local language is a key gateway to establishing deeper social connections and networks. Newcomers in cities often have the added benefit of an existing cultural community with whom they can speak their native language and remain connected to that element of their identity. It provides a support network that people in small rural towns do not have access to. Language learning takes time and effort; until they get to a certain level, there is an undeniable level of isolation from the local population.

"All people here know each other, so with zero French language you can't do anything with them.

For me even now it's better for me to live in Lebanon. Because I speak my language, I am free with native language. I can express everything I want." - Abdel, refugee

Classes provide an opportunity to learn French, get out of the house and meet people. Grassroots initiatives to teach newcomers French and organise activities add new types of engagement and interactions with the community. The difficulty for the teachers is the diversity of abilities within one classroom. As one teacher explained:

"You have those who went to school in their country, those who went to university in their country, and those who never learned to read in their own language. You find yourself in very heterogenous groups like this. You really have to start at the alphabet. You have to teach how to hold a pen.

I learned a lot because I was so used to teaching people who knew how to learn." – Nicole, volunteer

After observing a French lesson in which consisted of two families, Congolese and Ukrainian, it was evident that maintaining a consistent structure and learning trajectory was a difficult feat to achieve. Even with one small group, the levels can vary drastically both between and within families; consequently, these lessons can be challenging for some and too simple for others. This can be a delicate process, especially when there are people starting as complete beginners. One volunteer – a migrant herself – cautioned:

"If you push them too hard, they might not come back." – Alice, migrant & volunteer

As families move in or out of the town or cope with competing priorities, attendance falters or dissipates. The element of this that is specific to rural areas is the limited capacity of volunteers to offer a greater range of classes. They are constrained by time, resources, and numbers. When asked how it could be improved, one volunteer suggested that three of these classes a week – as opposed to just one that they were currently offering – would be significantly more effective in supporting newcomers' language learning efforts. This would require funding that is not currently available. Moreover, it is unrealistic to ask this time commitment of a limited number of volunteers, especially for those who are inexperienced in teaching foreign languages, which brings challenges of its own.

Refugees in France sign a contract with OFII and the NGO in charge of managing their resettlement, committing to certain rules and regulations. If they fail to uphold their end of the contract, they may lose the support provided by the NGO (e.g., administration, housing, and employment guidance). One such obligation is attending language classes, with the number of hours required dependent on the newcomers' level of French. Obligatory classes organized by the government agency OFII come with their own set of challenges. In theory, when a municipality

has at least eight people who must take these language classes, the government is required to arrange official languages classes there. In reality, they were unable to recruit someone to move to Aubusson or Felletin, and these newcomers continued to make long, daily commutes to the larger city of Guéret to fulfil their obligations, approximately one hour away by public transport.

Not only is the practicality of this complicated for families with young children, the cost of taking the bus there and back several times a week adds up quickly and is not feasible for many families. Some are able to get a pass which allows them to pay a reduced fare for the bus. Nevertheless, the frequency and reliability of buses made it a very taxing process to get from one place to the other. As one person recalled, several days per week the whole family had to wake up before 5am to ensure they got the only morning bus that would get them there on time for the French classes, as it rarely ran to schedule.

"The days we had to take classes in Guéret, we woke up at 4:30, we had to leave at 5:10 to be on time to the class at 9. It's a hassle. Without a car here, it's not easy." – Mirela, refugee

Without these efforts they would be unable to attend, thus breaching the contract and risking losing the benefits allocated to them by the state. Moreover, these language classes provided by the government do not reflect the goals or needs of newcomers. It was recognised by both newcomers and volunteers that the hundreds of hours required by the integration contract concludes with the attainment of level A1/A2 French. This is still classified as a beginner's ability, and nowhere near sufficient to access work or participate in meaningful, in-depth social interactions.

The regional NGO in this region, Viltais, hires interpreters when dealing with legal affairs or documents that are fundamental for people to understand fully. In other cases, the solution takes the form of Google Translate – a simple, yet effective way to communicate conversationally when there is no common language. While this may suffice for the NGO's administrative tasks, there are a plethora of matters that would be immensely simplified with access to interpreters – not least, passing the theory test required for a driving license. The high cost of hiring interpreters and limited budget of the NGO means that they only do so when absolutely necessary. It was local volunteers in Felletin who managed to organise this for a Syrian family there. These issues are much less prevalent in cities with significantly more access to resources and relevant support mechanisms.

5.1.3. Housing

Many rural places that may want to open their community's doors to hosting refugees and asylum seekers are simply too small or too remote to welcome them. What is clear from the research is that there is a minimum of services and public transport needed for a town to be suitable for resettlement. It is the individual municipalities who choose whether to receive refugees, as well as

proposing various available housing. The regional NGO, Viltais, is then responsible for matching the newcomers to it. This is problematic when it is situated in an area lacking transport, basic services, and healthcare and administrative facilities; the NGO has no influence over which towns volunteer and subsequently, the accommodation provided. The good intentions of small municipalities offering up vacant housing in remote areas sometimes has unforeseen consequences when newcomers end up feeling extremely isolated and dependent on other community members for basic needs. It is similarly unsustainable for volunteers or NGO workers who must then compensate for the lack of basic services and provide near-constant support for what would normally be routine outings. Giving NGOs mechanisms to reject a locality due to its geographical unsuitability to host vulnerable and poorly resourced people would be a first step in avoiding these challenges.

A welcoming home – under construction

An association called Detzenou was created to respond to this problem by purchasing and renovating a dilapidated house in Felletin, with the intention of accommodating up to eight people in five lodgings (La Montage, 2021). The target residents are students of the local vocational college, young migrants, young workers or families wishing to settle in the area, and hopes to offer support mechanisms for integration alongside this affordable place to live (Detzenou, 2021). Their stated goals include promoting reception towards refugees and isolated people on low-incomes and engage solidarity through housing and cooperation. Workshops facilitated each month around the rehabilitation of this old building allow community members to follow along and participate in this project – by the people, for the people.

Locals in Aubusson were also highly cognisant of the reception potential of the town and the waste of resources represented by the unoccupied housing. Candidly put, one resident said:

"There is space, voila. There's space to welcome people. There are empty houses, empty apartments – it's ridiculous." – Antoine, local

The roadblocks come at every turn. Rural towns are seeing increasing numbers of vacant housing; on paper, this seemed to be an issue that could potentially benefit from resettlement initiatives. In reality, however, these houses and apartments are empty but not necessarily up for rent, or they function as someone's second home to be used just once a year. This impedes the ability of the municipality to both provide housing for newcomers and reduce the numbers of vacant buildings, particularly in the centre.

A phenomenon often seen in cities is 'ghettoization' of urban outskirts – social housing and resettlement accommodation is congregated in areas that are less well-off where the housing is significantly cheaper (Feinstein et al., 2022). The accommodation provided to resettled refugees in Aubusson was indeed more on the fringes of the town, isolating people from necessary services and support. It is more complicated to go into the centre by foot, which brings the cycle back around to the transportation issues faced by those without personal vehicles; this mobility challenge is aggravated by the location of housing. That this trend has been replicated in rural regions is an important finding, especially while properties closer to the city centre go unused. The risk is that as more people are resettled to these rural peripheries, the neighbourhoods will form "ethnic niches" which hinder efforts to interact and socialise with locals and heighten negative sentiment towards them (Urso, 2021: 24; Membretti & Lucchini, 2018). Other research suggests that as many newcomers have limited or no choice in location, they consequently end up living in areas with few possibilities for upward mobility (Bose, 2021; Singer & Wilson, 2011). The potential for this to be replicated in rural French towns underscores the need to address it. This phenomenon was acknowledged as a concern by the volunteers in Aubusson and Felletin:

"There are buildings but it's still a small ghetto. It's still reproduced here, the same thing as in the cities, that is to say rather than putting the [social housing] in the middle of the city, it is outside." – Nicole, volunteer

Moreover, the perspective of refugees living there highlighted another implication of this distribution. One interviewee admitted that he tried to avoid spending time with some of his neighbours – not because these locals were unkind, but as they often got in trouble with authorities, he didn't want to be associated with them. He was acutely aware of how he would be perceived by others, with the existing burden of locals' prejudices against foreigners weighing heavily on his shoulders. This issue extends further than resettlement and raises questions around these neighbourhoods that are isolated and disadvantaged for locals as well. Solutions to this issue should go beyond finding new places for refugees to live, and reconsider investment policies in order to resolve challenges faced on a larger scale by residents in these areas.

Suitable housing is about more than simply location. Previous research has recognised the impact of accommodation on mental and physical health, and overall quality of life (Feinstein et al., 2022; Ager & Strang, 2008). This was supported in an interview with Abdel, a refugee in Aubusson who said that they are not given a choice in the furniture put their apartment, yet still expected to pay for it. A house furnished with poor quality items that are not to the taste of the inhabitants adds an additional layer of negativity to an already challenging adjustment. This only adds to the sentiment

of being “allowed only a physical shelter but not a home in the traditional sense” (Feinstein et al., 2022: 12).

These challenges are important to address on a systemic level instead of managing it on a case-by-case basis. It is difficult for newcomers who have been given asylum to admit the standards of care are not satisfactory. Participants admitted not being comfortable to speak openly about complaints to French residents, even volunteers, as they fear appearing ungrateful to those who welcomed them.

“With French people I am not very comfortable to be myself. Because I live between them, I live in their home. It's not good to talk about their faults.” – Abdel, refugee

However, the objective of asylum should not be to provide the bare minimum to survive; it is to allow for the rebuilding of a quality life. This is not outside the feasibility of the current system, but it needs to be recognised as a key focal point. Moreover, with the knowledge that many may not feel at ease overtly criticising the programmes in place to support them or the people acting with the best of intentions, implementing systematic feedback mechanisms would be an important step for local initiatives to improve and adapt accordingly to the real needs of those they seek to support.

5.2. Opportunities

Despite the seemingly omnipresent challenges, many interviewees also acknowledge that there are benefits to moving into rural areas. Moreover, individual stories indicate the potential for successful resettlement in rural regions while also contributing to local revitalisation. People who have found work or opened their own businesses in these small towns provide tangible examples of new commerce and economic activity being stimulated in places where this is has been in perpetual decline for years, if not decades. Spending by newcomers in shops and post offices have allowed them to remain open when they otherwise would have closed. Schools receiving new students from families that move into the area benefit as well, by maintaining the pupil count high enough to keep their establishments running.

That said – several people suggested that despite these positive impacts, the true extent of revitalisation through these means was minimal. Reasons for this include these newcomers not having been around long enough to make an impact, some arriving without papers and not being legally allowed to work, and not being numerous enough to singlehandedly alter the towns’ development trajectories. It is worth appreciating the positive economic contributions of

newcomers while acknowledging that they are not solutions in and of themselves, as well as that they are not the only thing that is gained from welcoming these people.

5.2.1. Education

All children up to 16 years of age have a legal right to attend school. They are quick to pick up new language skills, make social contacts, and fit in more easily with the community through attending school. One NGO worker recognised that an advantage of living in smaller localities with fewer students per school is the school's ability to adapt more easily to the needs of new students. This sometimes acts as an incentive to stay in the area for parents if they can manage to navigate the work and mobility issues. For young people who are out of school, socialising with the local population is more difficult as there are not many others their age who have stayed. Pursing further education after high school undoubtedly implies moving elsewhere to cities with higher education establishments, for newcomers and locals alike. All the refugees interviewed had either left at some point to purse education or training elsewhere or anticipated having to move in the future for themselves or their children to go to university.

5.2.2. Solidarity

The close-knit nature of small communities brings with it an inherent sense of solidarity. Extending that solidarity to newcomers is not guaranteed from every local but it was recognised as a notable characteristic of small towns. In describing their town, several survey participants wrote of 'solidarity' and one volunteer working with refugees and asylum seekers emphasised that this element contributes strongly to life in rural communities.

"Solidarity. We are often able to find people to help, who lend us accommodation, even if it's not easy to host someone in your home. When we send a message because someone has a problem or needs something, we always find a solution." – Sylvie, volunteer

When discussing the positive elements of their time there, there was a common theme among the participants holding refugee status: these experiences often came as a result of the specific efforts of individuals around them, rather than as an intended outcome of the various systems in place to support them. Whether it was a volunteer consistently providing administrative aid, host families opening their homes and devoting their time to a vulnerable stranger, teachers supporting school and university applications, or an agency worker approving funding without fulfilling the usual criteria – these small-scale actions made a big difference. This selection of quotes is a strong illustration of the appreciation for these individuals.

"The French professor, I think she's the only one that I can count on… she helps me a lot with everything." - Zahra, refugee

"I have to thank [her] everywhere in my life every day. Also thank God for her, she is helping me a lot. She pushed me to go to university. I appreciate [the association] but to be specific, it's her." - Abdel, refugee

"Fortunately, my [host] family supports me every day, they are there all the time. If I need help, I know they are still there." - Khalid, refugee

"She helped us with the papers, income declarations, bus passes, applications, passports, contact with the municipality, getting financial aid. She did all this. It's a lot of work because she's a volunteer." - Mirela, refugee

"For the first semester, I have no rights, I have no scholarship, I have nothing. The manager helped me a lot. They gave me a room in the hospital and a free meal per day." – Khalid, refugee

It is understandably a great challenge to make resettlement schemes and support systems work for such a diverse group of people in need of aid. These testimonies highlight that it's about more than technicalities. Human connections and genuine demonstrations of kindness and support are absolutely fundamental elements of this complex process. Wessendorf and Phillimore recognized that it was an amalgamation of "serendipitous encounters, 'crucial acquaintances' and more enduring friendships" that proved invaluable to refugees' settlement (2019: 123). Facilitating this contact and allocating enough resources to grassroots organizations would only strengthen the important role that they play.

The success of Flebus

The association Flebus was started in 2018 to provide free French classes and socio-cultural workshops to migrant students at the local vocational college, people displaced by force, and the Syrian families resettled in Felletin and Aubusson (La Montagne, 2020). Karine Biao, having taught French as a foreign language in countries around the world, mobilised volunteers and continues to coordinate its activities. After recognising the institutional lack of language support for newcomers locally, the organisation also facilitates conversation cafes, math classes in French, and support with professional integration endeavours.

Within the last month, in July 2022, Flebus was allocated a grant of 1,000 EUR from the city council's budget of 50,000 EUR to support local associations (La Montagne, 2022). The more resources at their disposal, the more support they can provide to the diversity of newcomers participating in and contributing to their initiatives.

A local volunteer explained that everyone in the area knows that people host refugees here, if not directly connected to those who actually do it. This common knowledge creates an environment unlike that of many other rural towns, in which most people accept to receive newcomers, whether or not they fully advocate for it. The more people take interest in contributing in some way, the more it inspires others to get involved after realising that there is something going on that they can also be a part of. It is through instances like those illustrated in the quotes above and environments that are open to changing dynamics that processes of emplacement begin to take root.

5.3. NGO Disconnect

Funding from the EU and the French government determines the regional NGOs' capacities to provide support. Responsibilities regarding resettlement are allocated to these independent NGOs, but low budgets constrain the agenda and stretch their management resources. Different NGOs respond to the call for projects every couple years and compete for the contracts; when the state's agenda changes, so do the projects. In theory, this ensures that the organisations with the strongest programmes and abilities are given responsibility for this crucial work. In reality, the real risk of a management organisation being replaced every few years means restarting all the progress made through collaborative work with local volunteers and programmes implemented for newcomers there. Building these relationships and initiatives are vital and take time.

Participants' perceptions of Viltais, the NGO responsible for managing resettlement in the area, was that they were disorganised, understaffed for significant amounts of work, and consequently recruiting underqualified employees to take on key roles. Families under their care and local volunteers trying to help them were put in difficult situations, coping with issues such as accessing proper sustenance, warm clothes in winter, amassing debt due to not being properly informed on repayment requirements, and minimal explanations of the pandemic protocols, among others.

"They're badly paid and recruit people at the last minute, meaning people are poorly trained. – Clémence, volunteer

Newcomers having dealt directly with Viltais and having experienced first-hand the complications that came with it at the time retain their negative sentiments. The organisation was felt to be a business-first model, with a high priority on getting newcomers into jobs within their own project. While professional integration was the core mandate they were contracted on, it was not their only responsibility and criticisms arose in varying spheres of their management. In contrasting his time with Viltais and the local volunteer collective Accueillir à Felletin, Abdel articulated a striking reflection on his experience:

"You can feel when you have an organisation work with you to make money or when they work with you because you are human." – Abdel, refugee

However, the general consensus is that this situation has improved through the involvement of and extensive dialogue with the NGO Viltais, the volunteer group Accueillir à Felletin, and the government agency DDSCPP (Departmental Directorate for Social Cohesion and Population Protection). After assigning a post specifically in Felletin to better manage the resettlement, with someone deemed qualified, competent, and open to listening, strains on relations have eased and the groups aim to collaborate on their common goal of successful resettlement.

The specifics of this finding are extremely case-specific will not necessarily be observed in other places. However, the takeaway is applicable to all regions and stakeholder relations. Awareness of other actors involved and prioritising clear, consistent communication with them will avert crises before they happen. At a government level, sufficient funding for the tasks delegated to decentralised agencies and NGOs is crucial to uphold their own policy commitments; while programmes may differ across departments, the systematic nature of asylum registration and resettlement allows for a considerable level of preparation on distributing finances accordingly.

5.4. Newcomers – until when?

5.4.1. Local disparities

De Coninck (2019: 15) asked a pertinent question: "At what point does one [cease] to be a newcomer?", inspiring one element of this research. According to the results, the short answer, interestingly, is that they do not. This perception of someone as a newcomer, as well as the identity attached to it, prevails perpetually. For those who arrived in these small rural towns from other countries, being categorised as a newcomer (by both others and themselves) is perhaps not so surprising; their native language, culture and values may be markedly different from the native French population. Unexpectedly, however, the interviews revealed that this newcomer identity equally extends to French natives who are not originally from these towns. According to one interviewee:

"A true Felletinois is someone who has ten generations in the cemetery." – Georges, local

This depiction was supported by another interviewee, originally from this town:

"I am Felletinois, but my parents weren't born in Felletin, so I think that the true Felletinois are very attached to the town." – Isabelle, local

These sentiments run deep. It implies that even someone born and raised there may still have reservations about considering themselves a real part of that community. Decades hold little weight against centuries. In response to an opening question about how long they had lived in the area, and after several moments of loud silence, interviewee Antoine said:

"It's almost 20 years since I moved to Creuse… So, I am also a bit of a foreigner here. It's true that I'm not Creusois and I still feel it." – Antoine, local

Thus, in this sense, there may be a stronger sense of shared identity between non-French and French newcomers than between French natives from different regions. This is not least due to the differing political persuasions between these groups; with young newcomers often arriving with left-leaning values and new ideas, there can be a conflict of interests with older locals who may have more right-leaning tendencies and a sense of nostalgia about how thing used to be.

Survey results and speaking with locals, newcomers, volunteers, and local government officials confirmed that this disconnect is widely recognised. There are two groups that coexist without really mixing, each staying among themselves. One resident who had lived there for nearly 30 years stated:

"I have the impression that I find myself with two juxtaposing worlds who have difficulty communicating… Neither one is completely right nor wrong." – Georges, local

The apparent lack of dialogue may contribute to continuous misunderstandings and the perception that neither group is open to accepting or associating with the other. On a policy level, some suggest that it is the local government who must aim to take on projects that will satisfy people from all corners of the community. The responsibility is therefore not only on the shoulders of the newcomers or locals to reach out and overcome the tensions, but equally on those elected to positions of power to proactively establish some common ground.

Through discussions of this divide between the Creusois and neo-Creusois, the focus was not on refugees or asylum seekers, despite their increasing presence as newcomers in the countryside. It begs the question of how they can expect to feel included or integrated into a place with so many existing divisions. It was nonetheless maintained that for anyone arriving now it is easier than in the past, when people moving into the area were not welcomed with open arms. Now, newcomers migrating from countries such as Turkey or the United Kingdom arrive to find a pre-existing community into which they are immediately welcomed. While they may face similar struggles to those who were resettled in terms of learning French, the difference is that they arrive with significantly more finances, easily established cultural and linguistic connections with their respective communities, and – crucially – they arrived by choice.

Perhaps newcomers, both French and foreign, find more common ground and open dispositions towards each other than those who are of French origin but come from different parts of the territory. The neo-Creusois population is said to make up the more welcoming part of the towns, whereas the Creusois are reputably colder and more closed-off. This is, of course, a generalisation; there are those who do not match these assumptions and the boundaries of these groups are not unyielding. Ultimately, the importance is not about discarding the concept or label of newcomer, but rather creating an environment in which that is an acceptable and welcome element of one's identity.

5.4.2. Perceptions

Local sentiment of Aubusson and Felletin reflects a largely positive view of the area and countryside in general. Outside of comments on the availability of public transport and necessity of having car, locals tend to highlight their appreciation for living in a relatively calm and safe part of the country with a rich history and natural beauty. The kindness and openness of people in this area was repeatedly recognised by both those living in Aubusson and Felletin, as well as people who came from elsewhere to sell products in the weekly markets. Those who did not work or volunteer directly with newcomers seemed blatantly unaware of the acute challenges some had faced in the past other than widespread issues such as transport; issues pertaining to the lack of suitable clothing, food provisions, and language classes were not on the radar of those outside the volunteer network. Some acknowledged that they were unfamiliar with circumstances of refugees in the area:

"I don't know if they are well received. I don't know if they are doing well." – Antoine, local

It was notable that when discussing newcomers, there was still an 'us' and 'them' narrative, even when making positive reflections. People can have lived here for years but still be recognised as 'the Syrians', 'the Turkish', or 'the British' despite having established a life here with their family and businesses. Newcomers who did not arrive in the area as refugees make up a significant part of the population. There is a considerable Turkish community who has historical ties to the region, a plethora of British immigrants (and anglophone more broadly), as well as various other nationalities. They have also started businesses and attracted more people to the region through family links and contacts. These newcomers are seen as being extremely active in the community, both in terms of social engagements and economic consumption habits.

Les turcs de Bourganeuf

The Turkish community in Creuse, particularly the town of Bourganeuf, resulted from migrants moving to the region to work in forestry in the 1970s (Lemaire, 2020). This community grew with the French recruitment of Turkish workers to fill a workforce gap and the subsequent family reunification (Coussy, 2020). These Turkish newcomers established roots in the area and paved the way for the current sizable Turkish-French population in towns such as Aubusson and Felletin.

Their historical migration and current presence are well-known by those in and around the region. One migrant of Turkish origin explained that he had moved there unaware of the strong regional ties to Turkey. He noted that this community stays somewhat among themselves and continues to speak Turkish at home, despite having generations born and raised in France. That said, they were also described as extremely charitable, coming together to not only support one another, but also others in the community.

When locals spoke about newcomers, the discussion centred predominantly on French newcomers, that is, people of French origin who came from other parts of the country to settle in these rural communities. Any mention of refugees resulted from questions directly referencing that segment of the population. This was recognised both in interviews and informal conversations, as well as throughout survey responses, none of which mentioned refugees. This exposes a limitation in the research survey, as locals' perceptions of refugees or asylum seekers in particular would have added valuable nuance to the discussion of newcomers. That said, the fact that participants did not raise it themselves is also indicative; centring comments around young French newcomers rather than refugees, asylum seekers, or foreign migrants in general suggests that they are more visible and perhaps generate stronger friction between community members. However, this does not imply that locals are indifferent to the increasing numbers of those resettled or dispersed to the

countryside. Misperceptions can easily eclipse reality; these beliefs, however misconstrued, influence attitudes and actions towards others.

"There are not many of them. If I listen to some old Felletinois, we are invaded by refugees. I don't have the impression to see so many." – Georges, local

Experiences of refugees and asylum seekers are unfamiliar territory in the broader conversations around newcomers; not much is known about them other than some recognition that local organisations exist to support them. This unawareness risks contributing to irrational fears of these newcomers and represents a barrier to welcoming them unreservedly.

"When you look at the statistics, most people seeking asylum, refugees, as long as they are in accommodation facilities, they are rarely in contact with French people. [After meeting], there is much less the barrier of fear of the other, of the unknown." – Camille, NGO worker

"The moment they see that you're not a problematic person, that you don't do bad things, afterwards, they're nice." – Mirela, refugee

These quotes highlight two overlapping problems. The lack of interaction that refugees and asylum seekers have with French locals undoubtedly hinders their efforts to create connections and learn the language. The less exposure locals have to newcomers, the fewer opportunities they have to make accurate impressions of them and overcome irrational fears and prejudice. The vicious nature of this cycle is that, along with all the other practical barriers they face, it is then more difficult for newcomers to participate fully in the community if those around them hold misperceptions of their character.

Comments written on local media articles announcing the reception of refugees in Aubusson reflect attitudes both overtly against this reception as well as questioning whether it was a reasonable endeavour (Ho Hoa, 2021). Some anonymous excerpts of varying extremes include:

"Creuse seeks to repopulate itself at all costs. You must be realistic, not utopian. The desire to welcome people without having work to offer them is irrational."

"Let mayors take care of their suffering fellow citizens before refugees."

"Some belong to terrorist organisations and will not be deported… I am certain these mayors will open their doors to them."

These comments alluding to profound fears and concerns, however misinformed, serve as reminders that such viewpoints will be encountered even in supposedly welcoming spaces. With specific funding allocated by the state, support for newcomers does not come at the expense of

support for long-time residents; they are not mutually exclusive. However, if that is a widespread perception, it is worth being addressed by municipalities to ensure that misinformation is refuted with veracity. Felletin and Aubusson are known for their openness, with several participants asserting that these towns are more receptive than others in the region. The town hall provides a welcome pack to all newcomers and organizes a welcome day each September for all newcomers to connect and meet the local representatives.

One maintained that while welcoming newcomers works particularly well in Felletin, there are many other rural towns in which it doesn't, where people are overwhelmingly unreceptive towards migrants. In referencing the particular dynamics at play there, one man stated:

"I've seen things evolve and I'm not sure that I would find the same things in other towns in Creuse." – Georges, local

Even there, newcomers of both French and foreign origin sense the discontent of the Creusois; they feel that there is a lingering resentment over newcomers who receive grants to start new projects and businesses in the area, which were not available in their time. This conception that they alone worked hard, and newcomers are now being giving handouts sourced from local taxpayers is misplaced, and some recognise this despite still holding negative sentiments.

"On the other hand, these new projects… Well, I have the impression that they are mostly paid from funds that are...not the city's money, it is money that is obtained for projects. They responded to calls for projects. And then their project was successful. It worked." – Isabelle, local

This participant followed up with the idea that despite this, the older community may not be in a position to respond to these calls for projects and thus put forward initiatives aligning with their own interests. The prime example to which this participant was referring was the project funded to renovate the local abandoned train station, turning it into a socio-cultural hub and co-working space for associations. At its opening, the Creusois residents were noticeably missing from the crowd of supporters – this passive protest is indicative of the subtle tensions at play in Felletin. For example, it was suggested that having newcomers, such as Les Drôles de Damas described earlier, professionally cater local events vexes the older, established businesses that believe they are losing clients. These anecdotes are important to document, because any small town or community endeavouring to welcome newcomers will have to navigate its own set of peculiarities that come from diverse populations with competing priorities sharing relatively few resources.

5.5. Locality characteristics

5.5.1. Attitudes and expectations

Local population faces many of the same issues that newcomers do. Even those in significantly more vulnerable circumstances, such as refugees and asylum seekers, can find some common ground with locals on issues such as transport, work, and healthcare. While they face additional, unique challenges to this, these are essentials for all residents, whose lacking makes a big issue. In this sense, solutions to problems that both groups face will garner more widespread support and potentially minimize the gap between them when they can come together on common ground to advocate for solutions to these shared problems. These issues seem to hold great weight than that of migration, which was only marginally described by those interviewed and surveyed unless specifically asked.

People understand the need for increased in-migration while simultaneously taking issue with those who do so. Longstanding divisions based differing principles and priorities have created an atmosphere in which most people recognize these subtle tensions, yet few engage in a dialogue to overcome them.

Expectations of locals lie both with the newcomers themselves and the local government. The general attitude appears to suggest that newcomers ought to be more considerate of the needs of locals, instead of implementing projects that are of little perceived benefit to those outside their community. With newcomers proactively seeking and obtaining funding for their initiatives, older residents who do not necessarily have the know-how to do the same believe that someone should be doing it on their behalf. Local government acting on the interests of the younger population is perceived to be at the expense of priorities raised by long-time locals. However, a policy catering to a certain group does not necessarily imply that it will not also benefit others; Rabrenovic (2007) found that improved administrative services based on the needs of newcomers ended up benefitting the wider public as well.

Some participants articulated the need for a public forum in order to put all interests on the table and ensure voices throughout the wider community were heard equally. While this highlights an important concern that current policies and projects do not fully reflect residents' needs, elected representatives pointed out that attempts to solicit peoples' opinions on local issues results in only a small proportion of the population responding. Consequently, these do not present sufficiently representative data off which legislation can be based.

5.5.2. Economic revitalisation

As well as the local population, characteristics of towns themselves are central in shaping the experiences of newcomers. Despite their differences, Aubusson and Felletin are both undeniably shrinking rural towns in close proximity to one another, who share a great deal of historical and cultural ground. Their declining and aging populations are widely recognised as an issue, as well as the need to encourage young people to move into the area. Within the past eight months, a new post focusing on the revitalisation of the town has been established in Aubusson's local government. The creation of this position demonstrates the political will of the locality to further its development and encourage the increase of commerce and business growth in the area.

There's an inherent contradiction between the closed nature of the town's older residents, and the revitalisation strategies implemented in efforts to attract a younger population to maintain its inhabitable viability. Moreover, heightened interest in moving to the countryside following the COVID-19 pandemic has generated concerns over increasing property prices; these areas have become increasingly sought after by city-dwellers choosing to buy cheap rural properties. The amount of vacant housing is perceived to have decreased within the past few years, which, if true, would reverse an upward trend in vacant housing seen for the past few decades. The next official census results updating this information are expected in 2023, but the municipality representatives confirmed in an interview that there had been a significant uptick in real estate purchases last year.

The notion that newcomers could help turn the tide on rural shrinkage has become a political and academic point of interest in recent years. It is not a novel concept, however the humanitarian spin on this strategy in the form of refugee resettlement may garner support lacking from previous initiatives. Some newcomers who migrated to these towns have visibly contributed economically through opening businesses, consuming goods and services, and bringing more people to the region.

"For example, we have a strong British community - those who remained are very active. They have even taken over businesses or created a business. So, they are really good, they are active populations." – Bertille, local government representative

"My migration to here, as far as I'm concerned, is a positive emigration… we're investing – buying this house, buying that house, buying the business, so it has some give back to the community." – Hasan, migrant

As far as refugee newcomers are concerned, their ability to effect change in an economic capacity is significantly more constrained due to the circumstances in which they arrive and the resources they have access to. Nonetheless, there have been instances of refugees successfully opening

businesses and contributing in this way to the local economy. A notable example is described below.

Les Drôles de Damas

The Drôles de Damas Syrian food truck is now a well-known staple of the weekly markets in Aubusson and Felletin; what started as a cooking-based language class has become one family's personal project. The local volunteer organisation Flebus initiated the class with several Syrian women as a way to exchange skills and make learning French more engaging and practical. After some moved to bigger cities and others dropped out due to childcare responsibilities, the remaining family took on the challenge of bringing their traditional cuisine to the remote corners of rural France. Through testing the market, saving up funds, sourcing a food truck, and networking, this project has proved successful and a valued addition to the town. A TV news report on life in Aubusson featured a short segment on their story and business. With intentions to expand the food truck into an established restaurant, this project has the potential to earn a permanent spot in this small town's daily life and contribute a diversity of flavour to the region.

5.5.3. Societal revitalisation

While the concept of revitalisation has an inherently economic dimension to it, there is also something to be said for bringing in elements of cultural diversity to towns that are so often monochrome. It is a different kind of contribution, but valuable nonetheless. Newcomers bring different cultures, religions, and ways of life which local children and adults alike may have never been exposed to. It is educational and an opportunity to expand one's understanding of the wider world around them.

"You need integration of different cultures, particularly in the rural France because they don't go anywhere. Something needs to come to them for them to see if people are different." – Hasan, migrant

"The impact is to open their eyes. Dare to meet people who are not like us and it can be very positive." – Camille, NGO worker

With support from local volunteers, newcomers' passions and strengths are shared with the community in a form of mutual exchange, be that storytelling in schools, dance lessons, workshops, or cooking classes. There is a richness to these contributions that is overlooked when homing in on the wealth-creating capacity of these newcomers. Shrinking rural towns may be in need of more

people and job creation, but this is not a burden to be placed on those who come seeking refuge – it is unrealistic to expect them to influence an entire town's development trajectory.

5.6. Emplacement (under the guise of integration)

Integration has turned into a widely used buzzword with little clarity on what it looks like in practice. Interviewees regularly referred to the extent to which newcomers were integrated, but rarely explained what exactly this subjective concept entails. When asked to elucidate, Hasan described it in the following way:

"Integration is really accepting somebody else into your life, into your home, into your country. It's very much a two-way thing. I think integration is as much as the individual wants to be integrated into society. It's not just down to the society only." – Hasan, migrant

This interpretation states that it's not exclusively the responsibility of one or the other. While integration is the term currently recognised and used colloquially, this paper employs the concept of emplacement. Participants' understandings of integration are still relevant when speaking of emplacement – in this case, building new communities and dynamics comes with expectations of efforts from both sides. It is a collaborative process of co-creation based on local-level interactions and relations of varying depth. However, even when the intention is there, connecting with locals on a more profound level proves to be difficult. As one volunteer put it:

"[The community] accepts them, but there are not very strong links that are created with them. They are still very isolated." – Sylvie, volunteer

This highlights how the concept of 'welcoming' newcomers has various dimensions. It must be remembered that "participation in various domains is not the same as integration in these domains" (Hynie, 2018, as cited in Feinstein et al., 2022). Bringing someone into a community does not necessarily imply that they will be included in it or able to easily build something within it. Time and resource constraints, as well as an absence of people of similar ages or interests, can hinder efforts and motivations to collaborate. Even if there are classes, workshops, or activities available, families looking after young kids do not always have capacity to participate and engage fully. Younger newcomers find rural areas to be devoid of people their age and experience boredom and a desire to move elsewhere for more exciting prospects. The tranquillity of Aubusson and Felletin that older newcomers or those with young children may appreciate is considered more negatively by these young adults.

Volunteers who work closely with newcomers (refugees in particular) suggest that they do not feel particularly integrated in the community. While this varies per person and per family, differences rooted in culture and religion were identified as barriers to fitting in seamlessly. Language proved to be a major hindrance – those with greater language skills also have improved connections within the community and among locals. It is not only the newcomer-local relations that are impacted on this front, nor should those relations be regarded more highly than others; all connections hold potential to add value, meaning, and a sense of belonging to peoples' lives. Newcomers from various backgrounds have different mother tongues and are equally unable to communicate with one another unless they all learn a common language.

"She didn't speak French. I wanted to talk to her because we got on the bus together, we went back to Aubusson together, but we didn't speak at all. When you can't speak French, it's hard. Because how are we going to talk?" – Mirela, refugee

The potential solidarity and friendship that could exist between newcomers is hindered by language. As detailed earlier, it is arguably the most freeing and fundamental of skills for newcomers to grasp to create space for emplacement.

Figure 9: Ressourcerie Court Circuit (author's photo).

5.7. Best practices

Understanding which practices work well in creating positive experiences for newcomers in rural areas is fundamental – it provides a basis off which to build for existing organisations and prompts others to implement similar initiatives. While the nature of this case study means its findings are not necessarily generalisable, ideas are adaptable and certain ones could be loosely transferable.

In Aubusson and Felletin, direct connections (often one-on-one) with local volunteers seems to be most effective way to provide support and ensure no one is left unaided. The NGO responsible for managing refugees' resettlement plays an important administrative role, but the presence of locals who mobilised to create volunteer groups such as Accueillir à Felletin and Flebus, and initiatives within the Ressourcerie Court Circuit was vital. They provided administrative support, but also more than that – friendships, activities, and community building between locals and newcomers. Their support extends beyond those who manage to obtain refugee status, to asylum seekers, undocumented persons, and unaccompanied minors.

A growing organisation in the neighbouring department of Limousin called JRS (Jesuit Refugee Service) approaches their work with a similar mindset of prioritising mutual exchange. Having started with a small group of French students and forcibly displaced persons, they work on a principle of collaboration between locals and newcomers, with reciprocal benefit and an emphasis on spending a quality time together (JRS, 2022). By the time some of their participants obtain their legal status and thus, their rights to work and education, they have already taken the first steps into being part of new community, with some language skills and local contacts.

"It allows all forcibly displaced people, whatever their origin, religion and gender, to participate in activities with French people. And the goal is to co-construct activities together on an equal footing.

It's always French people who do things for exiled people and the exiled person is a bit passive. Here, the idea is that she is an actress and that she is considered as a person in the same way as a French person." – Camille, NGO worker

From original volunteers who created the programme to newcomers who take part in it, these continuously evolving and improving initiatives are overwhelming viewed as a success. One parallel drawn between JRS and the smaller scale organisations in Felletin and Aubusson is this idea of direct engagement with the community. Enabling access to volunteer opportunities in environments that entail frequent contact with the local community, engages them in meaningful projects, and contributes to their language learning appears to be a strong practice that could be implemented in a multitude of settings. Moreover, asking people what they want to do and using

their strengths or interests to determine parts of the programme prioritises their agency in a way that is likely more effective at maintaining their energy and commitment.

In Felletin, some refugees are teaching dance classes, giving juggling lessons, or helping students with their English while sharing their story. Locals teach French and math to newcomers, and also train other volunteers on how to teach French. The success stems from everyone bringing their strengths to the table. It demonstrates the added value that newcomers bring to rural communities and allows the co-creation of projects between newcomers and locals. Looking more critically at these positive outcomes revealed a lack of formal feedback mechanisms for refugees or asylum seekers. While possible that this is done informally in conversations, not everyone is willing to initiate an evaluative discussion. However, it is worth remembering that newcomers have "unique knowledge and perspectives that can improve integration programmes and policies" (Share SIRA, 2020), and successful initiatives could still benefit from pro-actively seeking constructive criticism.

Finally, ensuring strong ties between the regional NGO commissioned to support the refugees and the local volunteers who undertake significant work on the ground to provide services and extra support is fundamental. The challenges endured by refugees under the responsibility of Viltais came to a boiling point when a confrontational meeting was organised between the DDCSPP, the NGO, and local volunteers to divulge the reality of their situations. Reorganisation and establishing a specific post within Felletin have ironed out some issues, but it gravely exposed the need for clear communication and collaboration between the two groups. The dependence of newcomers on volunteers and NGO workers can be extremely high; support is needed to navigate the French administrative system, connect with other charitable organisations (food, clothing, furniture, etc), request certain documents, set up schooling or language classes, and organise transport. This is even more crucial in rural areas than urban, as there is often no other support network available to step in as needed.

5.8. Reflection

The results of this research are situated in the context of communities that are increasingly diverse and interdependent. The need for effective solutions to resettlement issues will persist, as will that of the rural decline seen across Europe for decades. While these may not represent the simple, idealised solutions to one another we hope for – rural spaces needing to be filled and people needing access to safe spaces – it is nonetheless fundamental to continuously look for novel perspectives and reassess what we assume to be incompatible and indisputable.

6. Conclusion

Research in this field generally comes in the form of qualitative case studies. These are difficult to generalise, and it would be erroneous to do so; each town and village comes with unique characteristics and personalities that define it. An understanding of how such a settlement initiative would work in any given region would entail specific enquires into that area. That said, a few broader conclusions can be derived from this study that sought to answer the following question:

What is the potential role of rural shrinking areas to host newcomers while offering space for livelihood improvement?

Using a case study approach covering the rural towns of Aubusson and Felletin in France, this research assessed the characteristics of these localities, of the native population, and of newcomers to the area, as well as the opportunities and limitations recognised by both groups. Interviews, surveys, and secondary data allow for a comprehensive understanding of what mechanisms work well and what crosscutting issues remain unresolved.

6.1. Country living – for whom?

Rural shrinking areas are increasingly opting to host newcomers while simultaneously trying to counteract the perpetual decline of their aging populations and local economies – balancing these endeavours is an ambitious undertaking, with no guarantees of success on either front. The research indicates that areas to which people are resettled must be assessed for suitability. In places that are truly lacking in population or services and are deep into the stages of rural decline, it could be argued as unethical to intentionally place vulnerable people there who may already face great challenges in access or mobility. A successful placement with mutual benefit for the community would be one in which there remains opportunities for work, functional essential services within a reasonable distance, and prospects of social gatherings.

Moreover, if locals are uninformed or misled regarding the initial welcoming of newcomers, the process may encounter major friction from those who strongly identify with their local community and culture. Collaboration and collective action are key in changing perceptions of newcomers and giving all locals a sense of pride in the work their community does for these vulnerable people. Emplacement of newcomers may not always happen organically and should not be expected to. Both top-down and bottom-up processes are needed to facilitate interaction between newcomers and locals and encourage trust among them. Moreover, relations between different groups of newcomers can be equally valuable and should not be underestimated. Grassroots organisations and volunteers are crucial in this regard, as well as high level trusted figures, such as mayors or

clergymen who publicly maintain support for welcoming newcomers and advocate for them. Community building takes work and is most likely to thrive when all actors pull their weight.

In this case study, the data pointed to the fundamental roles that particular individuals have played in the emplacement process for some newcomers, and in making positive differences to their resettlement experiences. A logical deduction is that whether rural areas are suitable depends largely on the newcomers who are settled there (their character and ability to engage) and the resources that they have access to. In a sense, other people are also a type of resource for them. The volunteers that facilitated positive interactions and initiatives were key in shaping these newcomers' futures. Whether or not people will step up to this role or undertake the necessary amount of responsibility to emulate these successes is difficult to predict. Especially in the beginning, these actions driven by intuition and a deep-seated desire to help had little long-term planning and no guarantees of success.

If emplacement is about creating something new then that is what we see in Aubusson and Felletin, but only on a very small basis and with a select few newcomers (in this case, refugees specifically). It is not the norm, but equally, it is not impossible. There is a lack of sufficient support for these kinds of grassroots initiatives and personal projects that are rooted in individuals' strengths and passions. The potential for successes of this sort also depends heavily on the region in which they take place. There are radically different support mechanisms and programmes in neighbouring departments that would shape someone's experience very differently. Landscape and infrastructure both hold major influence in the feasibility and practicality of various proposals, but certain ideas could be loosely transferable.

6.2. Final thoughts

There is no consensus on the 'right' way to welcome newcomers or facilitate local revitalisation. I found constant learning processes, relentless trial and error, and fierce determination to find solutions. People are full of ideas and ambitions – many of which would be feasible with sufficient resources and organisation. Apart from the need for greater support at the highest levels, this research revealed the potential to rethink the concepts of integration between newcomers and locals. If even the French identify as newcomers after living somewhere for decades, perhaps the distinctions perceived between them and migrants are not so significant after all. It obliges us to rethink what we aim to achieve when policies speak of 'integration', and whether that's a realistic goal in a heterogenous society in which natives themselves do not feel completely embedded.

A change in terminology incurs a change in perspective. Emplacement – or the concept of creating something new within the bounds of the environment – may be the shift that is needed. It is the

common ground between those who have lived in Aubusson and Felletin for decades and those who arrived a few years ago. Due to the nature of the challenges faced by communities in rural areas, bridging these diverse social identities with a shared objective would likely be of benefit to all. Open minds are hard to force, but this effort can be eased with interactions and engagement. When it is fear or mistrust that builds barriers and misconceptions, it is human stories and demonstrations of compassion that can break them down.

6.3. Further research

Future studies could entail using a gendered lens to explore the distinct experiences faced by different genders in resettlement in similarly shrinking rural areas. In this research, it was noted that newcomers taking up gendered roles – often unpaid, reproductive work by women taking on responsibilities of childcare and housework (Zabnina, 2009) – consequently missed out on opportunities to build new relationships, find employment, and progress in language learning. Therefore, it would be worth examining the extent of the impact on these women and their ability to engage in emplacement processes, as well as discerning what their specific needs are to mitigate this impediment.

From a political standpoint, research delving into the incentives behind and impacts of politicians' decisions to receive refugees and asylum seekers would make an interesting contribution. French municipalities can opt-in to hosting these newcomers; in remote rural regions which so often swing to the right side of the political spectrum with high anti-immigrant sentiments, are local leaders rewarded or rebuked for this seemingly humanitarian agenda?

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Appendices

Appendix I: Interview guide: Newcomers

Interview guide

Introduction

- ➔ Introduction of researcher.
- ➔ Explanation of research.
- ➔ Explanation of interview procedure, including anonymity, right to withdraw at any time, future use and deletion of data, recording rights.
- ➔ Allow time for questions if necessary.
- ➔ Sign consent form detailing above information.

Background

- Name, age, origin
- What did you do there (i.e. employment/education)?
- Why did you come to France?
- When did you arrive here (country & specific locality)?
- Did you move here with others/family?
- What are the biggest differences between your home-country and here?
- What's your status here?
- Did you choose this locality, or were you assigned(/dispersed) here? Did you have a choice when you were resettled?

Plans and aspirations

- Are you planning on staying here, or moving somewhere else?
- What are your plans for the future (work/education/etc)?

Relationships and connections

- Do you have friends/relatives from your home country here? – do you know other people from [home country] here?
- Who are your most meaningful connections here?
    - How did you establish those?
    - Who would you go for advice/if you need help with some practical issues?
- Do you feel like you know enough people (both locals and other newcomers)?
- How do you go about meeting new people?

Involvement in community/locality

- What were your first impressions of this community?
    - Have they changed?
    - If so, why / how?
- How is it going now?
- What do you do in your free time?
- Have you faced any challenges while moving / living here?
    - If so, what? How have you coped with these challenges?
- How do you get around here?
    - What would make this easier?
- Could you describe your accommodation situation?
    - Does it meet your needs?
    - What could be improved?
- How do you stay informed about things going on in town?

Involvement in initiatives

- How did you find out about XXX (name of NGO/initiative)?
- Why did you decide to get involved / take part?
- What do you do for XXX?
- How do you feel about what you do?
    - Do you feel like what you do is similar to what you did / studied before?
    - What would you change / do differently?
- What are your relationships with the other people working for XXX?
    - What opportunities do you have to voice your opinion?
    - Do you feel like you can influence/change (small) things in the way XXX is run?
- How do you stay informed about things going on in the organization?
    - (talking to colleagues, talking to other newcomers, talking to locals, receiving updates from organizers)
- Do you ever participate in meetings with other co-workers and organizers?
    - What do you usually discuss in these meetings?
    - Do you feel like what you discuss is important in the way things are done in the organization?
- How has this impacted your time here?

Appendix II: Interview guide – Volunteers

Interview guide used for locals who were engaged in welcoming or integration initiatives and therefore had a different awareness of newcomer experiences. Locals not engaged in initiatives were interviewed with a modified version of the guide. Semi-structured nature of interview meant not all interviews followed this precise structure.

Introduction

- ➔ Introduction of researcher.
- ➔ Explanation of research.
- ➔ Explanation of interview procedure, including anonymity, right to withdraw at any time, future use and deletion of data, recording rights.
- ➔ Allow time for questions if necessary.
- ➔ Sign consent form detailing above information.

Background

- Where are you from?
- How long have you lived here?
- Do you have family here or elsewhere?
- How would you describe this community?

Plans and aspirations

- Are you planning on staying here, or moving somewhere else?
- What are your plans for the future (work/education/moving/etc)

Involvement in community/locality

- How would you describe this community?
    - Lifestyle, atmosphere, politics, quality of life, cost of living
    - How does it differ to other towns in la Creuse?
- How do you meet people here?
- What are the advantages of living here?
- What are the challenges of living here?
- Has this community changed over the years?
    - If so, how?

    - How do you feel about these changes?
- What could be done to improve things in this community?
- What can you tell me about the vacant housing in the area?

Knowledge of newcomers

- What do you know about newcomers / migrants in this community?
- Have you met any of the newcomers in this community?
    - What are your perceptions of them?
    - What do you think others think of them?
- Do you know of any initiatives related to newcomers in this community?
- Do you know of any NGOs working with them?
- To what extent are newcomers integrated in this community?
- Is there anything that should be done differently?
- Do newcomers contribute to the town? In what way?

Involvement in initiatives

- How did you find out about XXX (name of NGO/initiative)?
- What is your role with XXX?
- Why did you decide to get involved / take part?
- What is the dynamic like within the organisation?
    - What are your relationships with the other people working for XXX?
- How do you stay informed about things going on in the organization?
    - Talking to colleagues, talking to other locals, talking to newcomers, receiving updates from organizers
- How has this impacted your life here?
- How does these initiatives impact those who participate in them?
- How do you think resettlement impacts locals' lives?

Additional questions

- What has worked so far (re: initiative objective)?
    - Why?
- What has been most effective in welcoming people here?
- What could be done better / what other initiatives could help?
- What could other towns do to have similar success?

Appendix III: Interview participants

Visualisation of the 23 interview participants, divided into Natives (French) and Newcomers (foreign). Further categorical distinctions made with the positions they held pertaining to the research. All names are pseudonyms.

	Name	Interview Category
Native	Antoine	Local
	Isabelle	Local
	Georges	Local
	Camille	NGO representative
	Anne	NGO representative
	Daphne	NGO representative
	Sylvie	Volunteer
	Marianne	Volunteer
	Zoe	Volunteer
	Nicole	Volunteer
	Clemence	Volunteer
	Lorene	Volunteer
	Bertille	Local government representative
	Judith	Local government representative
	Maelle	Local government representative
Newcomer	Khalid	Refugee
	Elion	Refugee
	Mirela	Refugee
	Zahra	Refugee
	Abdel	Refugee
	Alice	Migrant
	Hasan	Migrant
	Coumba	Migrant

Appendix IV: Online survey questions

Survey posted to an online Facebook group for residents of Felletin. Beginning of June 2022.

Introduction

Hello! My name is Megan & I'm doing my Masters in International Development at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. The title of my research is 'L'accueil en milieu rural : les experiences des nouveaux arrivants et l'impact sur la ville'.

I've spent the last few weeks in Aubusson & Felletin doing research for my thesis, looking at rural areas & the experiences of those living in them. Whether you are new to the area or have lived here all your life, it would be extremely valuable to hear your perspective.

I'm inviting you to take a survey for research. This survey is completely voluntary. There are no negative consequences if you do not want to take it. If you start the survey, you can always change your mind and stop at any time.

The questions aim to gather an understanding of residents' opinions on the challenges and advantages of living in the rural areas, the reasons for these and what could be done to improve it. The survey should take 5-10 minutes.

All data is completely anonymous & no identifying data will be linked to the survey.

At the end of the survey, you will be offered the opportunity to volunteer for a further interview. This is also completely optional and is independent of the data provided in the survey.

Agreement to Participate

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time.

To take this survey, you must be:

- At least 18 years old
- Living in rural France

If you meet these criteria and would like to take the survey, click the button below to start.

Demographic questions

1. How old are you?
2. Where are you from?
3. Where do you live now?
4. How long have you lived there?
5. What is your employment status?

Survey questions

6. How would you describe the community in your town?
7. What are the advantages of living there?
8. What are the challenges of living there?
9. Do you intend to stay in the region or move elsewhere?
    a. Why?
10. Has your town changed in the time that you have lived there?
    a. If yes, how?
11. What could be done to improve things in your community?

12. What do you think of the arrival of newcomers in the region?
13. What impact do they have?
14. Do you feel like a part of your community?
    a. Why or why not?
15. Do you have any other comments you would like to make?

Appendix V: Online survey participants

Anonymous data providing general demographic details on survey participants. Depicts a different demographic to those who took part in the interviews.

1. How old are you?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	18-29	16.13%	5
2	30-39	22.58%	7
3	40-49	16.13%	5
4	50-59	25.81%	8
5	60-69	16.13%	5
6	70+	3.23%	1
	Total	100%	31

2. Where are you from?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	France	96.77%	30
2	Elsewhere	3.23%	1
	Total	100%	31

3. Where do you live now?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Felletin	54.84%	17
2	Aubusson	6.45%	2
3	Elsewhere (please specify)*	38.71%	12
	Total	100%	31

*All participants in this category specified that they lived in towns/villages in close proximity to Felletin.

4. **How long have you lived there?**

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Less than 5 years	9.68%	3
2	5-10 years	19.35%	6
3	11-20 years	25.81%	8
4	21+ years	12.90%	4
5	All my life	32.26%	10
	Total	100%	31

5. **What is your employment status?**

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Employed	54.84%	17
2	Self-Employed	16.13%	5
3	Unemployed	6.45%	2
4	Student	0.00%	0
5	Retired	12.90%	4
6	Other*	9.68%	3
	Total	100%	31

*Other answers included: retired but employed, teacher, and shopkeeper.