

Hosting asylum seekers and refugees in small cities and rural areas : the French case



Demonstrators, carrying a sign reading “Open your eyes, Stop immigration, Stop the loss of our status, let's organize the return of illegal immigrants, delinquents and foreign criminals”, take part in a demonstration against the planned new CADA in Saint-Brevin-les-Pins, western France, April 29, 2023. F.Tanneau / AFP



Entissar, a Sudanese refugee, crosses the snow-covered village of Thal-Marmoutier, in eastern France. © HCR / Benjamin Loyseau

In France, protests against the openings of reception centers for asylum seekers (CADA) in small towns and rural areas are multiplying. Sometimes due to the residents themselves, often joined by troublemakers linked to extreme right-wing movements such as Eric Zemmour.

A CADA is a place where the asylum seekers are hosted in the meantime while their asylum application is being examined and until their refugee status is granted or denied by the French office for protection of refugees and stateless people (OFPRA). Hosting refugees and asylum seekers in small and medium-sized towns raises a number of challenges.

The rise of the extreme right in France since the 80s is one of them. In 2023, the mayor of Saint-Brevin-les-Pins, a seaside town of around 15,000 inhabitants, resigned following threats from opponents to the opening of a new CADA. However, the Mathieu Tardis sociological studies show another image of the rural zone and small town.

A policy of dispersal

In 2015, the dismantling of the Calais and Paris camps, home to hundreds of exiles, was the starting point for this new period for the national reception scheme (DNA) and for the country's small towns and villages. In 2016, a national plan for the reception of asylum-seekers was announced, based on quantified targets for the development of CADA accommodation by metropolitan region.

Plus, France, committed to the European resettlement program since 2008, has redesigned the organisation of this disposal, based on “decentralization” since 2018. Prefects are responsible for appointing a “resettlement referent” and launching a call for projects in each region and department.¹ As with asylum seekers, the aim is to “distribute” refugees outside major cities, where the housing market is tighter. This policy, which focuses on the availability of reception places, can pose challenges in terms of integration and access to healthcare, even if reception in rural areas can also offer many opportunities.

Challenges and opportunities

The spatial distribution of CADAs has therefore changed in recent years, with an increase in capacity in areas already served, especially outside major cities between 2015 and 2017, and more within major agglomerations between 2017 and 2019. New CADAs have also opened in areas where there were none before, especially in Brittany, the Massif Central and Rhône-Alpes. This spatial distribution and its recent evolution reflect the age-old policy of dispersing institutional accommodation for exiles across the country, and the continuation of this trend. The distribution of accommodation sites must take into account criteria such as “the vitality of rural areas (shops, schools, etc.)”, “the accessibility of accommodation sites, particularly in terms of public transport networks” and “real estate opportunities”.

In their studies, sociologists demonstrate that rural areas are places of solidarity. Indeed, local players are innovative in meeting the needs of new arrivals. Integration, in the sense given to it by Thierry Tuot: *“the process over time by which foreign origin is no longer the real reason for the social difficulties encountered”* is thus favored in these areas. However, the difficulties remain. Firstly, a feeling of isolation, accentuated by the absence of public transport.

1. Matthieu Tardis, “Another story of the “refugee crisis”. Resettlement in small towns and rural areas in France”, *Études de l'Ifri*, French Institute of International Relations, July 2019. P.8

2. Berthomière, W., Fromentin, J., Lessault, D., Michalon, B. and Przybyl, S. (2020). The reception of exiles in rural areas in France: national orientations and local variations of a dispersion policy. *European Review of International Migration*, Vol. 36(2), 53-82. P.14

So transporting refugees to administrative or medical appointments, or even shopping, becomes a major task for social workers and volunteers. This creates a feeling of dependence on the part of the refugees. Access to healthcare is difficult, in areas suffering from a lack of doctors, hospitals and specialists such as psychologists.

In CADAs, associations and volunteers take care of language learning, without being trained or supported to meet the requirements. Mathieu Tardis's study shows that schooling for children is more complicated for teenagers, but, the geographer Bénédicte Michalon mentions the opportunity to sometimes prevent class closures.

Access to employment is difficult for asylum seekers (allowed to work after 6 months) and refugees, for whom French is an obstacle, but so are trauma, health problems and the presence of young children. But these reasons are not specific to small towns, where, however, jobs are available in a variety of sectors, being opportunities for both refugees and local employers. Volunteers bring the benefit of their local network to the table, making it easier for refugees to access the job market.



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Audio report produced by Susie Bouyer in Saint Brevin in February 2024, for the AJIS 2024 prize.

The added value of small towns in terms of reintegration is undeniably the fact that the local population compensates for the lack of available services. As a result, refugees develop a sense of belonging to their new community. Once they have completed their asylum application and obtained their residence permit, some of them change their migration trajectory to come and settle in the area where they were housed in CADA.

According to Tardis : “What perhaps most distinguishes small towns from large cities is the strong sense of belonging that residents have to their territory. They feel a sense of pride in demonstrating that these territories retain a capacity for action.” 3



Fatim, asylum seeker, Odette Laforêt Coupard and Pierre Coupard, volunteers with the Bréviinois attentifs et solidaires collective. Ouest-France / Susie Bouyer

3. Mathieu Tardis, “Another story of the “refugee crisis”. Resettlement in small towns and rural areas in France”, Études de l’Ifri, French Institute of International Relations, July 2019. P.71