WELCOMING SPACES

Country report: The Netherlands

Welcoming Spaces in The Netherlands

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WELCOMING SPACES

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Executive Summary

In the past decades, immigration to the Netherlands has been most prevalent in the growing metropolitan area of the *Randstad* located in the West of the country. This geographical area – which comprises the four largest cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht – as well as migration to it, has received a majority of scholarly and political attention, while the development of, and immigration to, shrinking urban and rural areas, has been widely omitted. Shrinking areas in the Netherlands have their own specific economic, political and social dynamics. These dynamics may be less striking than in countries like Germany or Spain at first sight, yet influence the lives of people with and without migration background as well as the rise of initiatives for and by migrants, or as we call them in this report "welcoming spaces".

This country report contextualises Dutch (shrinking) regions and welcoming initiatives within them. The report presents data on the basis of empirical research and desk research conducted between 2020 and 2022 on 18 welcoming initiatives in 9 municipalities. In terms of a typology of welcoming initiatives, it presents an overview of the main actors involved and the thematic focus of these welcoming initiatives. Welcoming initiatives are grouped into three clusters: social inclusion and intercultural exchange, innovative welfare and work in care and lastly the green/energy transition. For each of these clusters, we describe organisational aspects, objectives and the main actors involved in welcoming initiatives. The analysis focuses on how the emergence of welcoming initiatives is conditioned by marginalised regions' economic viability, social wellbeing and political stability and how these initiatives, may contribute to these three factors. The final section of this report brings together findings on these three factors and explicates the relevance to the four focus areas of the broader Welcoming Spaces programme: i) geography, positionality and history, ii) policies, rules and governance, iii) discourses and representations and iv) migrant-citizen engagements.

1. Introduction

Although most migrants choose to go to urban areas, many end up in depopulating and economically marginalised regions in Europe. This migration is sometimes considered as a burden on or threat to local wellbeing, but it also raises hope for those regions. The Welcoming Spaces research programme aims to rethink ways forward in creating inclusive spaces in such a way that it will simultaneously contribute to the revitalisation of marginalised places as well as to the successful emplacement of newcomers. It does so by conducting comparative research in five European countries: Spain, Italy, Poland, Germany and The Netherlands.

This report focuses on welcoming initiatives in Dutch localities. Two questions are central in this report: how is the emergence of welcoming spaces conditioned by challenges in economic viability, social wellbeing and political stability in the selected localities? And how do welcoming spaces contribute to those three factors in the locality? The report builds on a previously conducted 'Quick Scan' of welcoming initiatives in Dutch localities, which provided an overview of the variety in localities in relation to the national, regional and local contexts. The overview established a starting point for developing a typology and database. Building upon these, systematic data collection was done in 9 municipalities on 18 initiatives, aiming to unravel how these initiatives are organised, implemented and how they stimulate or hinder revitalisation of marginalised regions. This report analyses the aspects of economic viability, social wellbeing, and political stability. It does so first by identifying to which economic, social or political challenges the welcoming initiatives aimed to provide a solution. Second, it assesses in which ways, for whom, and to what extent these solutions worked.

The Welcoming Spaces programme not only aims to identify and assess welcoming initiatives, it also seeks to understand why and how they are (un) successful. This is done in the third phase of the research programme in which the relative weight is assessed of potential explanatory factors: market-related factors including geopositionality, governance-related factors including national and European rules and regulations, civil society-related factors including the strength of the ecosystem, and factors related to public opinion and social and political discourse. This report will discuss the relevance of the findings in The Netherlands for each of these factors.

The report is structured as follows. First, we offer an overview Dutch policy and scholarly debates on migration and the revitalisation of shrinking regions. We then move on to discuss the theoretical considerations that underpin this report and outline our approach, methodology, and locality selection criteria. The next section provides an overview of the selected municipalities and a detailed discussion of key characteristics of the 18 welcoming initiatives, which we have grouped into three clusters based on their thematic focus. The analysis of welcoming initiatives is structured in three parts, focusing on economic viability, social wellbeing and political stability. It is wrapped up with a discussion of the relevance of these findings to each of the focus areas of the Welcoming Spaces programme (geographic positionality, governance, discourse, migrant-citizen engagements). In the conclusion we bring these insights together and offer general reflections on the importance of such a contextual understanding.

The context of shrinkage

While the Netherlands is a densely populated country, and still growing in population, this is not the case for all regions. At the periphery, the Dutch population is no longer growing and changing in composition. Here, the effects of a general European trend in population growth can be observed: the natural growth (number of births per person) is decreasing. While this is compensated by immigration in other parts of the country, this is much less the case in peripheral regions (Meijer & Syssner, 2017).

In line with Dutch scholarship, we consider shrinkage as an overarching concept that refers in the first place to demographic decline; a decline in population numbers, or number of households and challenges related to them (Bock et al., 2019, Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010, Hospers & Reverda, 2015). In the Netherlands, however, shrinkage is increasingly defined by demographic change: a changing composition of the population - due to ageing, (selective) out-migration and de-greening - has more significant effects on socio-economic development than the actual loss of inhabitants. Young, skilled people leave to more urban areas, have children there, while older people stay in peripheral and largely rural regions. As a result, shrinkage leads to downsizing and access to local and regional public facilities (education, care, shopping, public transport), employment opportunities, and impacts on the quality of life negatively (Syssner & Meijer, 2017).

Population change in numbers

The overall population of the Netherlands has been steadily increasing to 17,5 million in 2020. It is expected that this population will further grow to approximately 20 million in 2060 (CBS 2021). However, as population growth is mainly driven by migration, it is also predicted that settlement preferences and the processes of urbanisation will augment regional differences (figure 1). Population decline has only recently gained political and academic attention. Since 2005, governments, scientists and societal actors, are increasingly aware that various regions in the Netherlands face structural population decline that had a clear impact on the social-economic development of mostly rural and peripheral regions (Verwest & van Dam, 2010).

The areas with the highest rates of population decline are Zeeland Flanders, southern Limburg and northern and eastern Groningen. Here, the population is projected to fall by 16% by 2040 . In some other parts of the country, population decline is anticipated but has not yet actually started. In these areas, the population is projected to fall by 4% by 2040. In the peripheral and rural regions, shrinkage is caused by a gradual process of (selective) out-migration, ageing and de-greening: young, skilled people leave to more urban areas, while older people stay. Most significant for Dutch population change is the drop in pupil numbers in rural areas (figure 2).

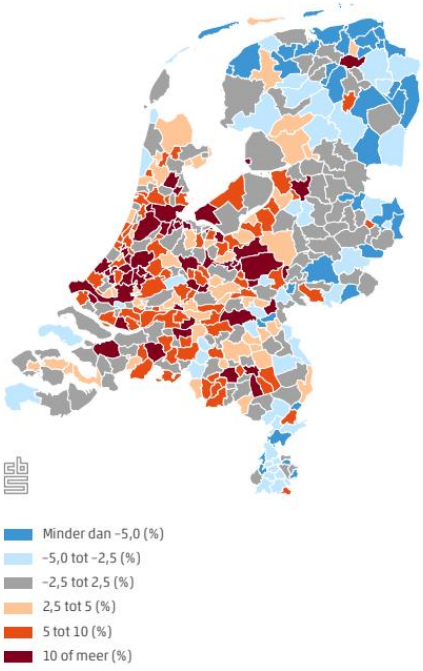

Figure 1: population growth 2018-2035

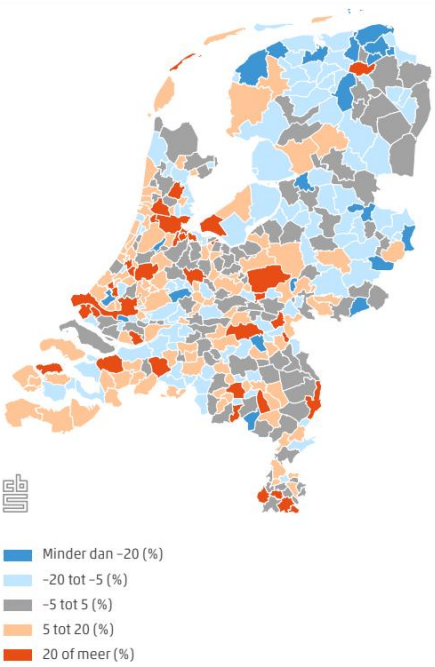

Figure 2: development of inhabitants source CBS Statline between 4 and 12 years old (2018-2035) source CBS Statline

The effects of shrinkage

This process of demographic change has a strong impact on the economic vitality and social infrastructures that also experience downgrading. Peripheral regions attract less investments, and local and regional governments experience problems maintaining services levels (such as education, health care, amenities, public transport) for a more care demanding and ageing population. At the same time, the number of (single) households continues to grow. Therefore, population decline does not have an immediate effect on the regional hardware: vacant real estate or abandonment of (agricultural) land are hardly visible in Dutch rural regions (Hospers & Reverda, 2015).

Being a former mining region, the process of shrinkage in the southern part of Limburg, is different from other peripheral parts in the Netherlands. First, this is a highly urbanised area: vacant real estate and job loss are visible aspects of shrinkage here. Second, the closure of the mining industry and consequent employment losses is a direct cause of the currently experienced population decline (Ročak, 2018).

Various parties, including governments and policy advisors, expect a range of negative consequences and problems due to population decline. These include reduced service level of emergency services and health care, decreasing number of children per school and the disappearance of social infrastructures like libraries, pubs and supermarkets, that not only represent a certain service level but also have a social function as meeting places (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017; Ročak, 2018). As a result, the travel distances to such services have increased over the years in rural and peripheral regions, and are significantly larger compared to the Dutch average (figure 3).

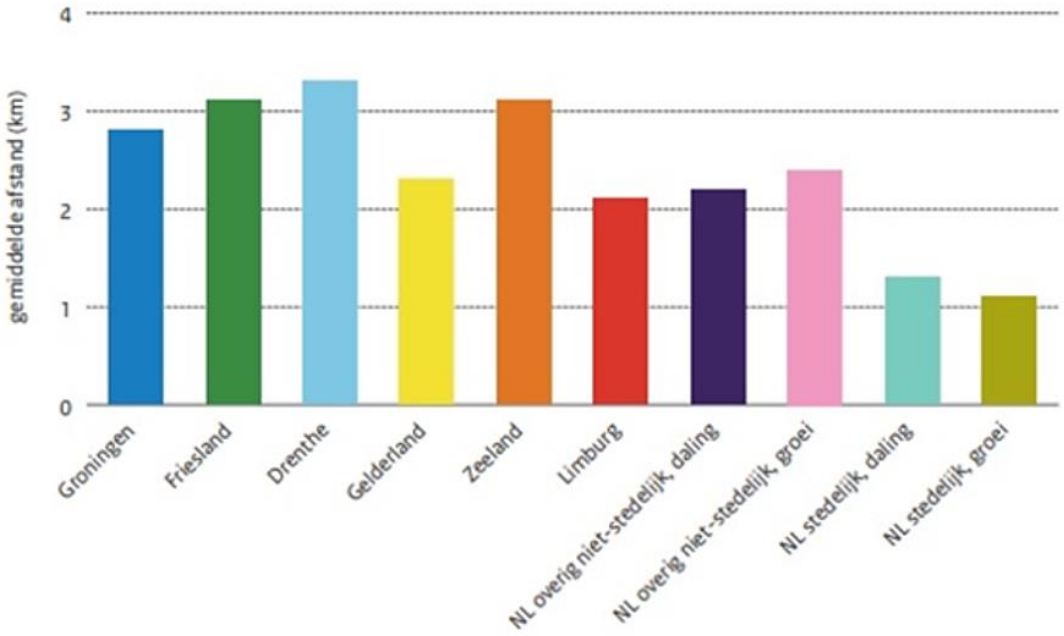

Figure 3: Average travel distance to basic services (doctor, supermarket, primary and secondary schools), in peripheral shrinking regions, against the average in other NL non-urban areas (niet-stedelijk), and NL urban areas (stedelijk).

From decline to demographic change

The Covid-19 pandemic and shortage of housing experienced in the Netherlands, however, seem to have tempered population decline and its expected negative consequences. Especially, for young adults (starters at the housing market) affordable housing has become a scarce commodity in metropolitan areas. This has impacted on the available housing stock in peripheral regions, which have become an attractive alternative for those that can work at distance and have roots in shrinking regions. As a result, population decline has stabilised in most peripheral and shrinking regions since 2019. At the same time, immigration to these regions was selective as well: mostly higher income and older couples have moved to more peripheral areas; another noticeable group of migrants concern formally recognised refugees (*statushouders*) that are provided with housing in shrinking regions (Bock & Haartsen, 2022).

The geographical context of migration in the Netherlands

In the past decades, immigration to the Netherlands has been most prevalent in the metropolitan area in the West of the country. This geographical area, also known as the Randstad, comprises the four largest cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. Migration to it has received a majority of scholarly and political attention, while the development of, and immigration to, shrinking urban and rural areas, has been comparatively under-explored. In recent years, some scholars and policymakers have sought to move beyond this urban-rural divide. These studies show that the group of residents with a migration background is becoming increasingly diverse (see figure 4). They have also sought to develop more fine-grained understandings of diverse local settlement and migratory contexts.

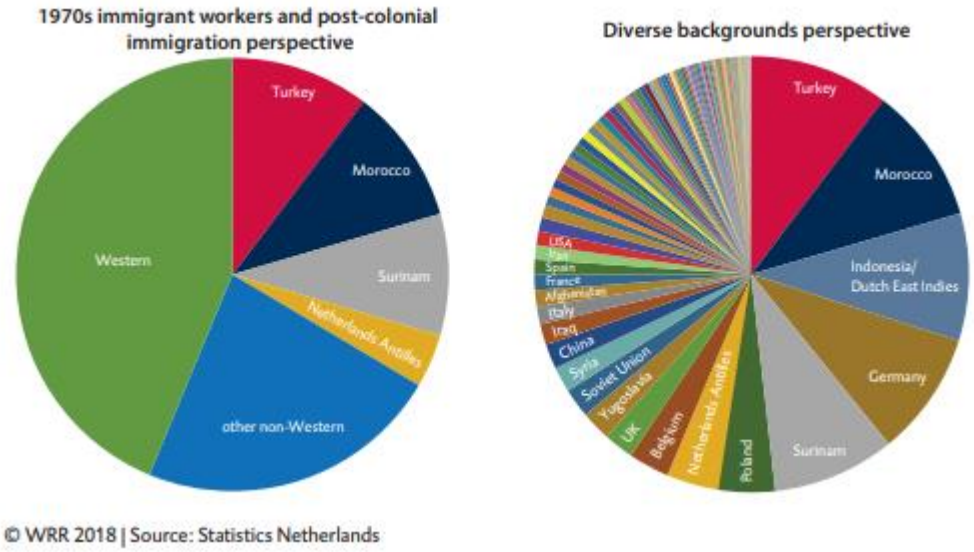

Figure 4 Two different perspectives on people with a migration background in the Netherlands on 1 January 2017, source WRR (2018).

The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), for instance, developed a typology of municipalities and migration diversity (Jennissen et al., 2018). This typology differentiates between 'average' Dutch municipalities, majority-minority cities, suburbs, metropolitan provincial cities, municipalities with one specific minority group, expat municipalities, horticulture municipalities, border municipalities and homogenous municipalities (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Different types of municipalities, source : Jennissen et al. (2018)

Migration to Shrinking Areas

The concentration of inhabitants with migration background, especially those with so-called "non- Western migration background", is higher in the urban areas in the West of the Netherlands (*Randstad*) than in the shrinking areas at the periphery of the country (see figure 6) (CBS, 2020). Shrinking areas, however, also represent important places of (potential) settlement and first reception for recent migrants and other people with migration background.

When it comes to the accommodation of asylum seekers, the picture is somewhat different. Many asylum seeker centres are located in shrinking areas. If granted asylum and a residence status, refugees are allocated housing in municipalities across the country. This process is part of the Dutch dispersal policy which leaves refugees with limited agency in their initial settlement (see de Hoon, Vink & Smeets 2021; van Liempt & Miellet 2021). After living in the Netherlands for longer, many move from their often-rural places of first resettlement to urban areas (CPB 2018, see figure 6 and 7). In some cases, this has resulted in the emergence of specific migrant communities. In the eastern border regions, in the town of Almelo, there is a sizable Armenian community, while the cities of Hengelo and Enschede are well-known settlement destinations for orthodox Christian Syrians.

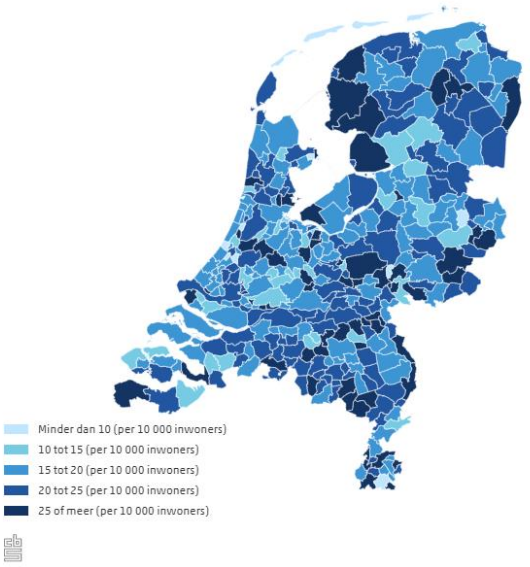

Figure 6: Number of recognised refugees per 10.000 inhabitants of the municipal population 2 months after leaving asylum accommodations (2016), CBS.

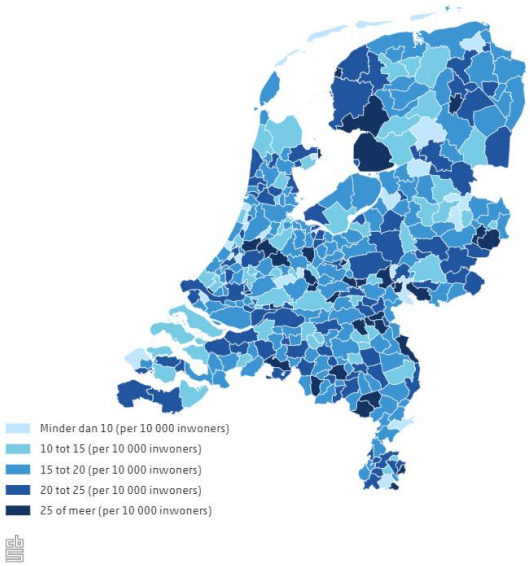

Figure 7: Number of recognised refugees per 10.000 inhabitants of the municipal population 42 months after leaving asylum accommodations 2016, CBS.

In terms of labour migration, some Dutch shrinking regions have historically attracted a EU and non-EU workers (Penninx & Schrover 2001). Parkstad Limburg, for instance, has a rich history of immigration of (coal) miners and their families from Poland, Italy, Slovenia and Morocco.

Theoretical considerations and research questions

This report does not focus on migrant integration, but rather on welcoming initiatives and their (possible) contributions to the revitalisation of Dutch shrinking regions. Engaging with critiques of the integrationist paradigm and multi-scalar perspectives on migration, this study focuses on welcoming initiatives that foster 'emplacement' of persons of a migrant background and other newcomers. As Çağlar and Glick Schiller (2018) note, emplacement is not just another way of saying integration. Rather, it is understood as:

> *"the relationship between on, the one hand, the restructuring of place within multiscalar networks of power, and, on the other, a person's efforts, within the barriers and opportunities that contingencies of local place-making offer, to build a life within networks of local, national, supranational and global interconnections." (2018, p.21)*

Moreover, we agree with Çağlar and Glick Schiller that this analytical concept invokes a 'sense of place-making and allows us to focus on a set of experiences shared by people who are generally differentiated by scholars and policy makers as either migrant or native' (2018, p.21). In other words, migrants as well as non-migrants seek emplacement. Another advantage of adopting a multiscalar perspective on (migrant) emplacement is that it is not imbued with normative assumptions about migrant arrival and local welcome that have long been criticised.

A second strand of scholarship underpinning inquiry is scholarly work on how international migrants may contribute to the economic, social and political revitalisation of marginalised regions. Various studies have focused on specific immigrant groups (Hedlund et al., 2017) or have zoomed in on particular arrival pathways, such as refugee resettlement to shrinking regions (Radulescu, 2021). This report draws on an open-ended, explorative approach that places welcoming initiatives in the centre of the analysis. Rather than zooming in on specific immigrant communities, we explore what challenges and opportunities these welcoming initiatives address and to whom they are directed, from the vantagepoint of various local stakeholders. We refer to different categories of migrants primarily in the analysis of discourses, representations and in relation to particular modes of governance and policy measures.

The third strand of scholarship that has informed our understanding of key concepts such as emplacement and arrival is scholarly work on arrival infrastructures. In their work on 'arrival infrastructures' Meeus et al., (2019, p.7) critique dominant ideas and normative assumptions about arrival and suggest considering:

1. *the multidirectionality of the histories and potential futures of migrants*
2. *moving beyond the dichotomy between permanent settlement and temporariness towards a more nuanced perspective on the temporal dimensions of migratory experiences*
3. *moving beyond policy categories (refugees, migrants etc.,) as a starting point for research, acknowledge the multiplicity of migratory subjects and struggles and focus on how migrants negotiate their futures vis-à-vis the regulatory apparatus of the stat*

This analytical concept 'emplacement' and these broader scholarly and policy debates on migration and arrival, therefore, underpin our open-ended inquiry into the interplay between welcoming initiatives and revitalisation efforts in Dutch shrinking regions. The overarching question that this report seeks to answer is twofold:
How is the emergence of welcoming initiatives conditioned by three factors in the locality: economic viability, social wellbeing, political stability. How can welcoming initiatives contribute to these three factors in the locality?

2. Approach and Methodology

General approach to data collection and analysis

The data collected is predominantly qualitative and was complemented with some quantitative data. Different qualitative data collection methods were used throughout the research. This study adopted a constructivist grounded theory approach characterised by, among other, a simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis. The data collection was not limited to a designated fieldwork period, but open-ended and exploratory to enable tracing the emergence and transformation of welcoming initiatives over time, between March 2020 and October 2022.

The following overview of data collection methods and other elements of the research design (see the list below) is not a chronological representation. It reflects the spectrum of qualitative data collection methods used by the research team.

- Analysis of statistical data (descriptive statistics for the different localities)
- Desk research; qualitative content analysis of legal, political and policy documents
- Desk research; qualitative web content analysis, websites welcoming initiatives
- In-depth, semi-structured interviews, mostly individual interviews and some group interviews
- Participant observations, in-person and online

The initial plan was to conduct a multiple case study analysis focused on three municipalities: Berkelland, Het Hogeland and Waadhoeke. In-depth research was conducted in two municipalities, Berkelland and Hogeland, where research activities focused on field work visits, participant observations, individual and group interviews.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic it was harder to conduct fieldwork, to access interviewees and often impossible to conduct on site participant observations. Conducting the interviews online during lockdown times made it difficult to understand the immediate local context and social relations. That said, participating in initiatives' online-activities and following their social media did provide the possibility for some participatory methods during lockdown times—this entailed, for instance, participant observation in a workshop on communication and migration, focus groups on the new migration policy and a workshop for teachers on diversity in the classroom. Moreover, organising three online workshops with the Welcoming Spaces community of practice we could map challenges in the field by inviting stakeholders to:

- the kick-off of the project in February 2020
- the online webinar for mayors on migration into rural and shrinking areas
- a workshop on "matching" processes of people and municipalities

The data collected by the PhD researcher was complemented by other members of the research team, such as the Community of Practice researcher who conducted participant observations and interviews with citizen initiatives in 2022. Between 2020 and 2022, bachelor and master students conducted thesis projects on relevant topics under supervision of or with support from Welcoming Spaces research team members.

In 2022, it was decided to further broaden the scope of the initial selection of municipalities, rather than to focus research activities on the third originally selected municipality (Waadhoeke). We made this decision after a series of informal conversations with representatives of welfare organisations and municipal policy

advisors working on labour migration in Waadhoeke. In Waadhoeke, the welcoming initiative that had been initially selected was no longer active and the other initiative in this municipality had since narrowed the focus to EU labour migrants.

In 2022, research activities focused on participant observations, interviews and informal conversations with coordinators and key stakeholders involved in welcoming initiatives in the municipalities of Nederweert, Middelburg, Smallingerland, Gulpen, Sittard-Geleen and Hulst.

Collection and analysis of statistical data

The data on the localities was collected from the databases of Statistics the Netherlands (CBS), regional statistics (e.g. Statistisch Zakboek Gelderland, Dataportaal Zeeland) and thematic websites on e.g. employment in the Netherlands. The analysis of this data focused on descriptive statistics, which were used for the writing of the quick scan. The data on selected municipalities was also used to write the locality profiles included in this report.

Collection and analysis of legal, political and policy documents

The collection and analysis of legal, political and policy documents served different purposes:

- In the case of welcoming initiatives initiated by municipalities and actors/departments within them, the analysis of municipal council proceedings and policy documents was useful to understand main aspects of these welcoming initiatives. In some cases, this information was used before conducting in-depth interviews with local (municipal) actors.
- In the case of welcoming initiatives coordinated by non-state actors, such as welfare organisations and civil society organisations, the analysis of municipal council proceedings and policy documents of local and regional governments helped us understand if, and how these welcoming initiatives are supported by the municipality and embedded in the local migration governance or revitalisation agendas.
- The analysis of legal, political and policy documents at the regional and national level offered insight into the legal, political and policy context in which welcoming initiatives operate.

Local political and policy documents were accessed online via municipal council archives. Regional policy documents, such as the regional approaches to shrinkage and revitalisation were accessed via the websites of regional governments. Lastly, we analysed legal, political and policy documents of different ministries via the Dutch government website.

Collection and qualitative content analysis of web content

Throughout the study, researchers analysed online web and social media content to 'stay tuned' to developments in the selected municipalities and the activities of local welcoming initiatives. Websites of welcoming initiatives offer an often general, minimal or partial understanding of their scope, activities and the actors involved. That said, it remains important to incorporate online and social media content in the analysis, to understand how local actors present and frame their initiatives vis-à-vis broader questions about migration to and the revitalisation of shrinking regions. From 2022 onwards, the Community of Practice researcher documented and analysed relevant online and social media content with the use of NVivo.

Approach to interviewing

In total 70 interviews were conducted by members of the Dutch Welcoming Spaces Research team and by bachelor and master students who completed their research under supervision of Welcoming Spaces researchers. Informal conversations were also used by some of different members of the Dutch research team when following up with interviewees, such as civil society coordinators of welcoming initiatives.

The focus of research activities was on local and regional actors involved in welcoming initiatives. We did not limit the scope of our analysis to specific kind of initiatives or actors in order to maintain an open-ended, inclusive understanding of welcoming initiatives. In other words, we did not have a target for the total number of interviews to be conducted in each municipality. In municipalities where municipal actors were coordinating welcoming initiatives, research activities focused on interviewing various municipal actors (mayors, policy advisors, municipal social welfare officers), whereas in other places our research activities were oriented to civil society actors who were coordinating local initiatives. Table 2 gives an overview of the scope of the affiliations and types of actors included in this study.

Table 1: Profiles research participants

Affiliation	**Sub-type**
Local authority	*Political actors*, mayors, deputy-mayors, municipal councillors
	Local administrators, policy-makers and policy advisors
	*Municipal social welfare officials, s*uch as coordinators of municipal civic integration programs
Third sector	Civil society representatives, activists, faith-based organisations, village councils, coordinators of citizens and community-based initiatives
Enterprises & entrepreneurs	Entrepreneurs, HR advisors of care organisations, shopkeepers,
Residents with migration background	Former refugees and migrant workers, key figures, such as individuals with a mediating role 'cultural connectors', volunteers and participants at welcoming initiatives
Residents without a migration background	Representatives from village councils, volunteers and participants in welcoming initiatives

For formal interviews, information sheets, consent forms and interview guides were used. Students that were supervised by Welcoming Spaces research team members received feedback on interview guides and advice on how to access research participants/initiatives and how to deal with ethical considerations (such as informed consent).

Participant observations
In addition to informal conversations, two research team members conducted participant observations. First, participation observation was used by the PhD researcher in two municipalities to complement desk research and interview data. Participations during this stage of the research in the municipalities Berkelland and Hogeland included participating in local events and activities organised by welcoming initiatives, visiting and 'hanging out' in local public spaces, such as libraries. This researcher also conducted online participant observations, for instance, during the webinar and workshop organised by the Welcoming Spaces team.

Second, the Community of Practice researcher used participant observations to gain a deeper understanding of how welcoming initiatives navigate challenges as well as local opportunity structures. To this purpose, she visited, participated and volunteered in several local events organised by welcoming initiatives in the following municipalities, Nederweert, Hogeland and Middelburg.

Complementary data collection by students
Between 2020 and 2022, bachelor and master students conducted research projects within the scope of and supervised by Welcoming Spaces research team members. Some of these projects focused on migration to shrinking regions and welcoming initiatives, while others zoomed in on regional revitalisation programmes.

Locality selection criteria

In the first phase, we conducted a Quick Scan of welcoming initiatives across the country. In the second phase, we zoomed in on welcoming initiatives in 9 selected municipalities. These municipalities were selected on the basis of two criteria: first of all, on the basis of having been formally designated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 2018, a shrinking region or anticipated shrinking region with population ageing and a selective outward mobility of young people. Second of all, they were chosen because of the presence of one or several welcoming initiatives within them.

Table 2: Governmental classification of selected municipalities

Municipality / Province	**Formal designation**
Hogeland / Groningen	Shrinking region, Hogeland (2)
Smallingerland / Friesland	Anticipated shrinking region, Southeastern Friesland (13)
Berkelland / Gelderland	Shrinking region, Achterhoek (5)
Gulpen-Wittem / Limburg	Shrinking region, Maastricht-Mergelland (9)
Heerlen / Limburg	Anticipated shrinking region, Parkstad Limburg (8)
Nederweert / Limburg	Anticipated shrinking region, Central Limburg (20)
Sittard-Geleen / Limburg	Shrinking region, Western Mine region (7)
Middelburg / Zeeland	Anticipated shrinking region, Walcheren (18)
Hulst / Zeeland	Shrinking region, Zeeland-Flanders (6)

The numbers in the table correspond to the regional codes in Figure 7.

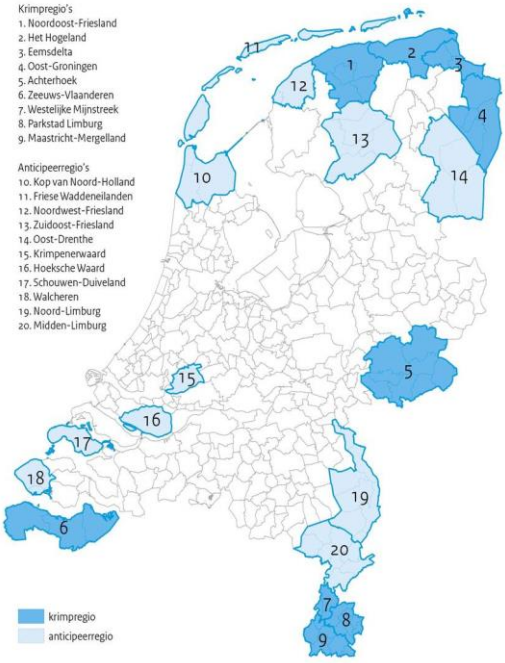

Figure 8 Government classification of shrinking (krimpregio's 1-9) and anticipated shrinking regions (anticipeerregio's 10-20), source: Ministry of Interior (2018)

Description of localities

In most cases, welcoming initiatives operate on the level of the municipality, rather than focusing on a specific district or settlement within the municipality. For this reason, this section offers a description of the regional context and the municipal context. These municipalities are located in six provinces: Groningen, Friesland, Gelderland, Limburg, Noord-Brabant and Zeeland. While some of these municipalities are rural and consist of dozens of villages (e.g. Hogeland and Berkelland) others are small cities (Middelburg and Sittard-Geleen).

Table 3: Demographic data municipalities (2020)

Municipality	Area (km2)	Population	Population growth projection 2021-2035	Population density (population per km2)	Share of population that is 65+	Share of population 25 or younger
Berkelland	258	43 747	-5,54%	170	25%	25%
Gulpen-Wittem	73	14 171	-3,91%	194	20%	29%
Heerlen	45	87086	-2,52%	1938	23%	23%
Hogeland	486	47801	-5,47%	99	24%	26%
Hulst	201	27 556	-0,03	137	23%	25%
Middelburg	48	48822	+5,31	1008	28%	22%
Nederweert	101	17 019	+1,84%	170	25%	23%
Sittard-Geleen	80	92429	+0,14%	1170	24%	23%
Smallingerland	117	56150	+0,28%	479	21%	28%

All nine municipalities were designated as shrinking municipalities or 'anticipated shrinking regions' by the Ministry of Interior in 2018. However, as table 4 shows, in some this trend has slowly started to reverse (e.g. Middelburg and Nederweert).

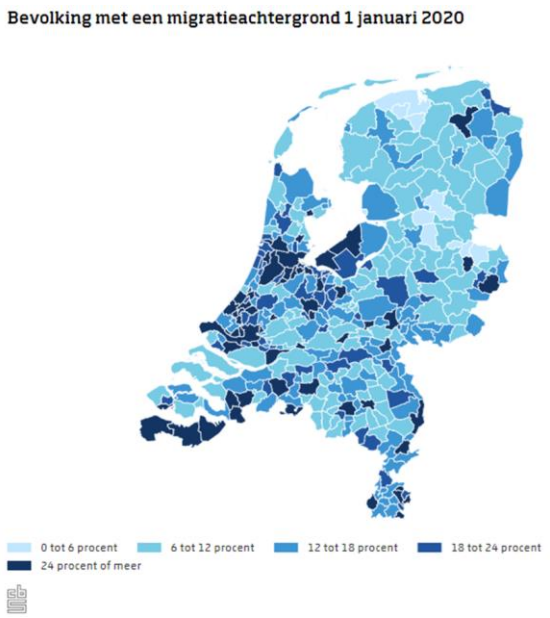

Figure 9 (left): Population with migration background on 1st January 2020 (CBS)

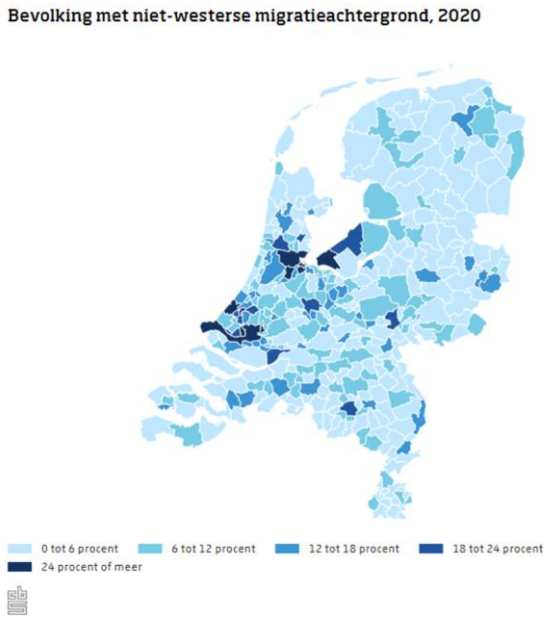

Figure 10 (right): Population with a non-Western migration background 2020 (CBS)

While the share of inhabitants with migration background is significantly lower than the national average (24,2%) in the localities selected for this study (Table 1), this is not true for some of the urban localities. Overall, it seems that urban centres located within or close to shrinking areas, such as Heerlen, have a share of inhabitants with migration background close to the national average (24,2%). Such urban centres represent important reference points for many migrant residents of shrinking localities. Many shrinking areas are located close to the borders with Germany and/or Belgium, cross-border migrants in some of these localities make up a significant share of the population.

Table 4: Demographic data municipalities, based on CBS Statline (2020)

Municipality	Population	Population growth projection 2021-2035	Population with migration background
Berkelland	43 747	-5,54%	8%
Gulpen-Wittem	14 171	-3,91%	14,1%
Heerlen	87086	-2,52%	29,1%
Hogeland	47801	-5,47%	7,7%
Hulst	27 556	-0,03	28,7%
Middelburg	48822	+5,31	19,4%
Nederweert	17 019	+1,84%	9,5%
Sittard-Geleen	92429	+0,14%	22,4%
Smallingerland	56150	+0,28%	11,7%

Overview of selected welcoming initiatives

In the nine municipalities, we identified a total number of 18 initiatives. The process of identifying these initiatives was driven by an explorative approach, rather than a theory-driven one. For instance, there was not a predetermined focus not on a particular category of actors. Similarly, we did not exclude initiatives on the basis of the duration or persistence of welcoming initiatives.

The welcoming initiatives included in this study cover a broad range of actors, objectives and impacts. The scope of the welcoming initiatives differs, some focus on inclusive measures for migrant newcomers, others are oriented towards all local community members. Several initiatives have been around for many years, while others have only recently been initiated. Some are coordinated by the municipality or regional governance partnerships. Others are grassroots citizen and community-based initiatives in which migrant newcomers or residents with a migrant background play an active role. In the Welcoming Spaces project, a typology has been used to differentiate between four different types of initiatives: government-driven, business-driven, citizen/NGO driven and migrant-driven initiatives. Most initiatives that we found in our study are citizen/NGO or government-driven. It is important to note that not all government-driven initiatives are local, as some are coordinated by multi-level governance coalitions.

This report builds on this earlier typology by differentiating the researched welcoming initiatives on the basis of their focus/revitalisation impact. The following section outlines the general characteristics of these initiatives, which were grouped into three clusters for the sake of the analysis of their contributions to the revitalisation of shrinking regions. These clusters are a) social inclusion and intercultural exchange, b) innovative welfare and care 3) sustainability and the green transition.

Table 5 Number of welcoming initiatives per municipality

Municipality	**Number of welcoming initiatives**	**Name initiative**
Het Hogeland	2	Colourful Het Hogeland, Vakland Hogeland
Smallingerland	1	Partisan Medical Mercenaries project
Berkelland	4	Newcomers in the Care sector, Culture Connectors, Samen Achterhoek, Language house East Achterhoek
Gulpen-Wittem	1	Life Next to the Brewery
Heerlen	1	WOOW
Nederweert	1	Link Nederweert
Sittard-Geleen	3	Into Care, to be Carefree (IDZ/UDZ), projects of Provincial Platform for Diversity (PPD) and Foundation More Colour and Quality (SMKK)
Hulst	2	Tragel Care project, Vogelwaarde Helpt Elkaar
Middelburg	3	SIREE, STAR, Language café de Herberg

Social Inclusion and Intercultural Exchange

The first set of initiatives focus on building local cultures of welcome, enabling intercultural exchange and complementing state support services. All initiatives in this category are citizen initiatives. A common denominator is a broad focus on activities that enable encounters between newcomers and other residents. These initiatives are not exclusively aimed at migrant populations, but seek to promote social well-being and social cohesion for all residents. Some initiatives initially targeted migrant newcomers but later broadened the scope to include other residents. All welcoming initiatives in this category organise activities for those who have already settled in the area, rather than on attracting new residents. Some of these initiatives correspond to what Dutch scholars have described as 'civic livability initiatives' (Ubels, Bock & Haartsen, 2020).

In terms of the framing of welcoming initiatives' goals, local actors do not state how projects may contribute to the revitalisation of shrinking communities. More often, they draw on positive frames and emphasize 'pride of place'. Municipal actors, such as (deputy) mayors also contributed to such framing, by voicing political support to the initiative and 'championing' local welcoming initiatives.

These citizen or civic liveability initiatives are volunteer-run with limited funding and activities are therefore often organised in community cultural centres. As such these initiatives support public community spaces. There are also (institutional) links between welcoming initiatives and local social welfare organisations. Some coordinators and volunteers combine their (voluntary) work for the initiative with their employment at the local authority, welfare organisation or public services such as the local library. Most initiatives are initiated and coordinated by people of non-migrant origins.

This might be linked to the initial research strategy (mainly in Dutch, desk research), while initiatives by migrant newcomers might also be advertised in informal networks, on social media and in different languages. An exception is the initiative *Colourful Hogeland* which at the time research was conducted was coordinated by long-term, foreign-born residents. In most cases, there were no links or partnerships with migrant organisations. Colourful Het Hogeland, however, supported the establishment of a local Eritrean platform.

There is a great variation in terms of the scope of these initiatives. Several work with fixed formats and recurring events, such as 'language cafes'. In other cases, the focus and format of activities vary. Some have received funding from the local authority or material support. A few were supported by foundations that promote participation and social inclusion. In general, such funding is not structural i.e. annual subsidies. In some cases, funding was just enough to keep the initiative going but not enough to pursue different projects.

Table 6, Cluster 1 Welcoming initiatives focusing on social inclusion & intercultural exchange

Municipality & region	**Initiative (Name)**	**Initiators and Actors**
Gulpen, Limburg	Leven Naast de Brouwerij *Life Beside the Brewery*	Citizen & civil society driven
Nederweert, Limburg	Link Nederweert	Citizen-driven
Sittard-Geleen, Limburg	Provinciaal Platform voor Diversiteit	Civil society-driven

	Provincial Platform for Diversity (PPD)	
Sittard-Geleen, Limburg	Stichting Meer Kleur en Kwaliteit *Foundation More Colour and Quality (SMKK)*	Civil society-driven
Berkelland, Achterhoek	Samen Achterhoek *Together Achterhoek*	Citizen – driven
Berkelland, Achterhoek	Taalhuis Oost Achterhoek *Language House East Achterhoek*	Civil society-driven
Berkelland, Achterhoek	Cultuur Verbinders *Culture Connectors*	Multi-stakeholder, migrants, local government, welfare organisations
Het Hogeland, Groningen	Colourful Het Hogeland	Citizen-driven
Middelburg, Zeeland	Taalcafé De Herberg *Language café De Herberg*	Citizen-driven
Middelburg, Zeeland	STAR Student Action for Refugees	Citizen-driven
Hulst (Vogelwaarde), Zeeland	Vogelwaarde Helpt *Vogelwaarde Helps*	Citizen-driven

Innovative Welfare and Work in the Care Sector

The second cluster focuses on newcomers' access to and work in the care sector. In contrast to the first category, most are public or private sector initiatives that aim at newcomers' employment and economic emplacement in the professional care sector. One initiative is coordinated by long-term residents and offers complementary support to help newcomers and other residents access care and participate in the local community. Several initiatives focus on newcomers who have already settled in the area, while some seek to attract international care professionals from abroad. Some target particular migrant populations, such as recognised refugees, or apply a regional focus by attracting international workers from particular countries.

Care providers, such as elderly and disability care homes and hospitals initiated many of the projects in this cluster. Three initiatives rely on a broad coalition of social agents, such as local authorities, care providers, educational institutions and welfare organisations. These partnerships extend beyond regional (provincial) boundaries and in some cases across the border (IDZ/UDZ]. They focus on supporting newcomers who are interested to take up work in the care sector through language and professional training. In contrast to citizen-led welcoming initiatives, these initiatives often have a fixed end date and are funded by regional authorities and in some cases, by EU funding (Interreg).

Beyond common objectives such as familiarising newcomers with the Dutch care sector and promoting their labour market entry into the professional care sector, there is variation in terms of the scope and format. *Partisan Medical Mercenaries*, for instance, is an initiative of an entrepreneurial (former) care professional who started a mediation agency that operates within the healthcare sector and recruits and

guides care professionals in the Netherlands and abroad. The enterprise's slogan, 'been there, done that' refers to the founder's personal experience with arriving in the Netherlands from Kosovo and working in the Dutch care sector in Friesland. This initiative has local partners, including several care providers and one municipality (Smallingerland), but it also maintains a broad focus on the whole of the Friesland and Groningen region.

All initiatives in this category explicitly state the benefits to local communities and regional economic revitalisation.

Table 7, Cluster 2 Welcoming initiatives focusing on innovative welfare and work in the care sector

Municipality & region	**Initiative (Name)**	**Initiators and Actors**
Sittard-Geleen, Limburg	In de Zorg Uit de Zorgen *Into Care to be Carefree*	Multi-stakeholder, government driven + other governance partners
Achterhoek (region), Gelderland	Nieuwkomers in de Zorg *Newcomers in the Care Sector*	Multi-stakeholder
Winsum, Het Hogeland, Groningen	Vakland het Hogeland *Trade Country Hogeland*	Multi-stakeholder
Hulst, Zeeland Flanders	Vogelwaarde Helpt *Vogelwaarde Helps*	Citizen-driven
Hulst, Zeeland Flanders	Tragel Care	Third sector Health care provider
Drachten and Smallingerland, Friesland	Partisan Medical Mercenaries	Business-driven

Green/Energy Transition

The third category includes welcoming initiatives that combine two challenges: migration and the green transition. In recent years, several programmes have been established in the Netherlands that link these two challenges, however, many are concentrated in non-shrinking regions. In the selected municipalities there are two welcoming initiatives that have this focus. Both are mixed initiatives in which various state, third sector and other actors collaborate. *Vakland Hogeland*, for instance, was established by several people working and/or living in the municipality of Het Hogeland who work or have professional affiliations to regional schools, the municipal job centre and a village cooperative. The partners of Vakland Hogeland currently include care providers, social welfare organisations, various educational institutions, entrepreneur associations and many others.

Table 8, Cluster 3 Welcoming initiatives focusing on the green transition, energy and installation sector

Municipality & region	**Initiative (Name)**	**Initiators and Actors**
Hogeland, Groningen	Vakland Hogeland *Trade Country Hogeland*	Multi-stakeholder initiative, local government, educational institutes, firms
Heerlen, Limburg	Wonen, Opleiden, Ondernemen en Werken (WOOW) *Living, Learning, Entrepreneuring, Working*	Multi-stakeholder initiative, municipality, (technical) university, housing companies

The other initiative in this cluster is the WOOW project in Heerlen. WOOW stands for Wonen (Living), Opleiding (Educating/Training) Ondernemen (Entrepreneurship) and Werken (Work). The WOOW project of the Smart Urban Redesign Research Group of the Zuyd University of Applied Sciences explicitly states that it addresses several interrelated challenges: shrinkage, labour market shortages, vacant properties and migration to Heerlen. WOOW offers work-study opportunities to prepare interested recognised refugees and others with relevant education for a career in the Limburg construction and installation industry. Both initiatives offer tailored support to recognised refugees, but are not exclusively oriented towards migrant newcomers. Another thing they have in common, is that they explicitly frame migrant newcomers' and other residents' contributions to regional revitalisation, rather than framing activities in terms of migrant integration.

3. Analysis

In this chapter, we examine how the creation of welcoming initiatives relates to economic viability, social well-being and political stability in the selected Dutch localities. Two questions are central in this chapter: how is the emergence of welcoming spaces conditioned by these three factors in the locality? And how may welcoming spaces contribute to those three factors in the locality?

Economic viability

Processes of shrinkage, migration and the economic viability of shrinking areas are intertwined in manifold ways. To increase economic viability, different governance strategies have been put into place to attract large investors and international corporations (e.g. Groningen data centre Google), to invest in sustainable energy production, to develop "innovative businesses and smart specialisation" (e.g. in the Achterhoek) or real estate and infrastructural investments to revitalise the regional economy (e.g. Parkstad Limburg). Despite some successes in attracting investments, either through lobbying, regional marketing or spatial development, the bottleneck for economic development for shrinking regions in the Netherlands is related to not only the lack of labour force and challenges to attract and to keep potential labour force, but also the labour offer in specific sectors that might not match the skills or ambitions of newcomers.

In understanding economic viability in the selected shrinking regions in the Netherlands, this section discusses the following issues: regional sector-driven promotion, employment and access to the labour market, training and transition trajectories in two economic sectors/areas, labour market initiatives and regional revitalisation programs, the challenges of diversifying labour opportunities in shrinking regions.

Regional marketing and sector-driven campaigns

In the different shrinking regions, there are government and business-driven initiatives to diversify regional labour opportunities. In the Achterhoek, municipalities joined forces with local and regional business and societal organisations to diversify labour opportunities for the local residents and newcomers as part of the project *SmartHub Achterhoek*: Toekomst in de Maak. In doing so, the initiative aims at not only regional innovation and economic growth, but also attracting and maintaining the labour force in the region. In Groningen, *Make it in the North*, is a partnership of regional universities and firms that seeks to attract highly skilled international workers. In Zeeland, the regional government has supported various campaigns to promote Zeeland as an attractive place to live and work. Between 2019 and 2022, it organised campaigns focused on the care sector to attract international medical academics, care professionals and general practitioners. The state-funded and coordinated Zeeland website, in contrast, offers a lot of information and support in Dutch for people who would like to work and live in the region.

Employment and access to the labour market in shrinking regions

From our case studies, we recognise a number of initiatives that address the topic of labour market access, in some cases in a locally or regionally specific manner. This may be linked to the importance of employment for the personal development of the newcomers connected to their values and identity, on the one hand, and the prioritisation of fast employment as part of local government policies, and related to that, to reduce newcomers' dependency on the social welfare system, on the other. However, labour market revitalisation does not happen automatically when migrants move into shrinking areas.

From our analysis, we noticed that spatial conditions related to the labour market interact with the labour opportunities of newcomers. This resonates with research on the employment experiences of refugees that

settled in the Netherlands between 1995-2005 (CPB 2018). Life in areas with less and less public services such as public transport, local grocery shops or educational institutions like primary schools on the brink of shutting down, limited migrant networks and organisations, and a limited or sector-specific labour market in geographical proximity can make it hard for an international newcomer to find their way. Some local initiatives provide support especially on this last matter while also contributing to revitalisation of the labour market in specific sectors that experience shortage of labour. The local economy in shrinking regions can, for instance, be revitalised through special transition trajectories for newcomers offering courses that allow them to receive training in demanded professions, and projects that support local organisations to develop skills to work with employees of different backgrounds.

Training and transition trajectories for recognised refugees are not unique to shrinking regions. Organisations such as the *Foundation for Refugee Students (UAF)* and *Refugee Talent Hub* offer training and transition opportunities across the country in partnership with various firms. Many training and transition trajectories were first pioneered in urban areas, but in recent years sector-driven trajectories have also emerged in other parts of the country. To illustrate, in Arnhem and Groningen, the Universities of Applied Sciences are pioneering training trajectories for recognised refugees and others in the energy transition sector.

In the selected municipalities, training and transition trajectories were heavily oriented towards the care sector and the energy and technical sector.

Training and transition trajectories in the care sector

One example of a training trajectory for recognised refugees is the Interreg project *In de Zorg Uit de Zorgen*, 'Into Care to be Carefree' (IDZ/UDZ), in the province of Limburg and the bordering provinces in Belgium and Germany. This is a cross-border initiative that allows people with a refugee background to receive training and work placements in the care sector—a sector with a shortage of employees across the three countries. The project formally ended in 2021, but the initiators developed a toolkit for care organisations and employers working in the care sector to address issues such as intercultural communication, rules and regulations for employing newcomers, and how to receive government subsidies for traineeships in the care sector (see figure 8).

Figure 11 Excerpt from a brochure of the project In de Zorg Uit de Zorgen (IDZ/UDZ). The captions in the poster stress both the obstacles of refugees in finding employment, an important part of their integration, and also the labour market shortage in the care sector.

In terms of impact on regional economic viability, IDZ/UDZ sought to support 150 refugees transition into professional care work. In addition, it sought to reach 150 care providers and care workers to improve

the public perception of refugees' labour potential for the care sector. The project evaluation states these objectives were more than achieved, as 329 refugees and 429 care providers and care workers participated. While the project formally ended in 2021, local partners *Zuyderland Zorg* and the municipality of Sittard-Geleen have continued the learning trajectories. In September 2022, a new round of applications started their training, a year and a half after the project closed.

By early 2022, Zuyderland welcomed 36 new employees who joined through the project. The project's evaluation report also sheds light on side effects of the project. It shows refugees' perceptions of their social contacts in the workplace and in the neighbourhood improved during and after participating in the project. Care providers, such as Zuyderland, therefore state that projects like IDZ/UDZ not only tackle labour market shortages in the care sector, but also contribute to recognised refugees inclusion in the labour market.

Another initiative related to the care sector is *Newcomers in Care* in the regional entity the Achterhoek. Here, the regional Vocational Education and Training school Graafschapcollege collaborates with local care providers to offer learning trajectories for migrant newcomers. The trajectory starts off with a three month of training (20 hours a week), including developing language and knowledge about the Dutch (work) culture, and an internship in a (care) organisation. After this first phase of the learning trajectory, the participants start a (paid) traineeship for one year, which means a three-day work week working for an organisation and one day of additional training (Figure 9).

Figure 12: Poster advertising a learning trajectory specifically for refugees to work in the care sector in the Achterhoek, "Nieuwkomers in de Zorg" Arbeidsmarktregio Achterhoek, shared on Facebook by Berkelland Friends Festival, 27th January 2021.

While many initiatives target migrants that have already settled in shrinking regions, in several shrinking regions care providers have started recruiting care professionals from abroad. In some cases, from Indonesia and India, but more often from Spain, Italy and Portugal. In the Achterhoek, care providers Marga Klompe and Careaz employ Portuguese care professionals in elderly care facilities. In this project participants complete a 16-week intensive training focused on Dutch language and (work) culture. In Hulst

in Zeeland Flanders, Tragel Care has taken similar steps to attract international workers from Spain for work in supported living services for people with disabilities since 2019. Prior to this, the disability care provider struggled to fill its vacancies, which it attributed to the mismatch between labour market demand and educational infrastructure in Zeeland-Flanders. Both initiatives aim for long-term settlement which is also why they offer practical support to help newcomers find housing as well as leisure opportunities and build social networks.

These are new projects, so it is difficult to gauge their impact on shrinking regions. A closer look into Tragel's approach to recruiting international care professionals, however, points towards a number of underlying factors and (potential) outcomes. In terms of underpinning rationales, Tragel considered recruiting in the Baltic states and Poland, but they believed Spanish care professionals would sooner consider long-term settlement in Zeeland Flanders because of economic developments (youth unemployment) in some parts of Spain. In 2019, the deputy mayor of Hulst visited Valencia with a delegation of regional employers to meet local authorities and stakeholders to build a long-term strategic partnership. According to Tragel's manager, it is a win-win situation as the international recruitment enables them to minimise youth unemployment without risking a brain drain in the Spanish partner locality (Valencia) (Kiers, 2019, van Elst, 2022).[1] Lastly, there are also cultural and historical reasons. Tragel's manager cites regional resonances with elements of Spanish culture in Zeeland Flanders, which he traced back to the Eighty Years War during which towns such as Hulst were transformed into fortified cities, as part of a Staats-Spanish defence lines network. While this translocal partnership between Hulst and Valencia addresses a contemporary challenge it is therefore also rooted in the region's unique borderland history.

In terms of impacts, Tragel expects to employ 30 Spanish care professionals by 2022. Of the first group of Spanish employees that arrived in 2019 only one stayed. Tragel therefore made a number of changes to its overall approach, offering direct employment rather than working through an intermediary employment agency and housing for the first year. It is also working together with the newly established *Expat Centre Zeeland* to give newcomers a 'warm welcome'. By attracting and training long-term international care professionals, rather than employing temporary workers, Tragel's management hopes to work towards durable solutions to staff shortages in the region. Tragel's initiative has attracted a lot of attention across the Netherlands and was labelled one of the most innovative projects by Zeeland's provincial government. Tragel's management has promoted its approach in Zeeland and Hulst municipality has incorporated it in its economic policy:

> *"Under the motto of 'Hulst Settlement City', we are working on attracting foreign workers. The focus is now on Spain (Valencia) and the healthcare sector. However, the goal is to also deploy the Spanish employees in other sectors such as logistics, construction and industry. We are not intending for them to become 'labour migrants'. They must become real Hulstenaren and permanently settle in the municipality to keep companies and institutions for Hulst and to make it an attractive destination for new businesses"* [2]

This welcoming initiative was included in this study, despite the focus of the Welcoming Spaces project on the role of non-EU migrants in the revitalisation of shrinking regions because it triggered broader approaches in the region and because Tragel is now a partner in another initiative, Care Home of The Future, in which it works together with the University of Applied Sciences and other educational partners

[1] This emphasis on the need to avoid contributing to a brain drain elsewhere, comes in response to longstanding debates in the Netherlands about the medical sector, international recruitment and medical brain drain.
[2] Quote from the Hulst Economic Policy Framework (2019-2022).

in Zeeland Flanders. One of the objectives of this partnership is to strengthen the regional care and welfare infrastructure through internationalisation. Regional partners work with a broad understanding of 'internationalisation', which includes recognised refugees' entry into training and transition trajectories as well as the recruitment of care professionals from other EU countries.

Partisan Medical Mercenaries (PMM) is another welcoming initiative that focuses on residents, newcomers who are already present in the region and those who have yet to arrive. PMM is a recruitment and secondment company founded by Blerta Shaqiri. Blerta fled as a child with her parents from Kosovo to the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, she worked for the healthcare institution ZuidOostZorg for many years. During this period, Blerta was confronted with an ever-increasing demand for qualified care professionals in shrinking regions. Through her translocal network and contacts in her country of origin, Kosovo, Blerta heard stories about youth unemployment. These developments, as well as other aspects of her own biography as a former refugee, motivated her to found Partisan Medical Mercenaries (PMM). PMM focuses on the one hand, on supporting municipalities, in coaching recognised refugees to take up work in the care sector. On the other hand, PMM wants to resolve obstacles for international care professionals by recruiting, training and supporting highly qualified healthcare personnel from Kosovo to the Netherlands. In 2022, PMM started a partnership with Caparis, a state-contracted third sector / welfare organisation that supports recognised refugees' access the labour market. PMM and Caparis's partnership will work towards creating work and training opportunities for recognised refugees in the municipality Smallingerland (Friesland). With these different projects, PMM aims to contribute to minimising acute shortages of highly qualified health/care personnel.

> *'With Partisan, I want to solve the shortage of care workers in a sustainable way. So that in 20 years' time, too, we can provide high-quality and affordable care to everyone who needs it. By utilising the potential of Dutch care professionals, recognised refugees and care professionals from the Balkan countries, this is possible. For me, this completes the circle. After all, as a former refugee, status holder and healthcare professional, I know well what motivates these groups. I also know how important it is to get and take opportunities."* Blerta Shaqiri, founder PMM (2022).

Training and transition trajectories in the energy transition and installation sector

In recent years, training and transition trajectories have been developed for migrant newcomers as part of the transition to green and sustainable (energy) resources. These trajectories appear to concentrate around knowledge 'hubs' such as (technical) universities in Arnhem and Groningen. In Groningen, the provincial government started a pilot project 'Energy Transition' with various local and regional partners. Within this pilot, the project 'Soft Arrival' focused on creating training and transition trajectories for 20 recognised refugees in the energy transition field.[3] In June 2022, the Social Economic Advisory Council (SER) advised the provincial government to continue to scale up the project and to incorporate it into broader regional programs, such as the Just Transition Fund and National Program Groningen.

While the Soft Arrival project is a regional initiative, we also found examples that focus on particular shrinking municipalities, such as *Vakland Hogeland*. Vakland Hogeland is supported by schools, entrepreneurs, social organisations and the municipality. The idea underpinning Vakland, is that residents of Het Hogeland, young and old, with or without work, can learn about and become proficient in the

[3] For more information, see the website of the Social Economic Advisory Council North Netherlands: https://www.sernoordnederland.nl/pilot-level-lang-ontwikkelen

various professional practices in the region. In doing so, Vakland seeks to attract employment, strengthen professional development of residents and by extension, their participation in local social life. This initiative receives funding from the *National Programme Groningen* and is managed by the municipality Het Hogeland. Another initiative in this area is the project *Living, Training, Entrepreneurship and Work (WOOW)* in Heerlen. WOOW offers a training and transition programme to prepare for a career in the Limburg construction and installation industry. Every year, twenty participants complete the programme. Of the first group, 90 percent successfully completed the work-study programme. Project coordinators state that three quarters of the participants found a suitable paid job immediately after the traineeship, mostly with their traineeship company, and two participants set up their own company (Van Tiggelen, 2022). The project also focuses on mitigating the shrinking effects in urban environments through collaborative renovation projects of housing flats. The collaborative dimension is that neighbourhood residents are involved in rethinking the social function of the flat building and in co-creating spaces for small entrepreneurs and practical education.

Migrant agency and economic viability

In addition to the stories told by entrepreneurs, civil society coordinators and consultants with a migrant background, we found that some migrant newcomers had found employment in a sector with shortage of labour force by their own initiative. For some, this involved a professional switch and an additional learning trajectory, and letting go of part of their identity that they associated with their original profession. The following observation from a group of refugee women in an initiative illustrates some of these struggles:

> *"When discussing the possibility of working in elderly care, the women were discussing how difficult it was for them to move to that kind of profession after having worked in a completely different profession, which they felt a passion for and associated with more prestige. At the same time, the argument came up that they all had the skills as they had naturally learned how to take care of family and children as in their role as caregiver and as a woman. The facilitators of the meeting, both previously working in the care sector, underlined that this work could be a steppingstone" (field notes 2021).*

Challenges of diversifying labour opportunities in a shrinking region

Although there are initiatives such as the ones mentioned earlier, availability of training and transition trajectories used to be rather limited in the most peripheral and shrinking regions. This in turn limited the possibility for newcomers to transpose their priorly learned skills.

In one of the interviews with a representative of *SIREE (Social Integration of Refugees through Education and Self Employment*) an interregional initiative in Zeeland (2018-2021) and the neighbouring Belgian province funded by the European Union, we heard about the challenges newcomers face when living in a periphery. One of the stories was about a woman that came to the Netherlands as a refugee and now lived in the southwestern province of Zeeland. She was an English teacher in Syria, but to perform the same profession in the Netherlands, she had to complete a training trajectory which was only offered two and a half hours away by public transport. This turned out to be impossible for her:

> *"There was a director of a secondary school in Damascus, a school for 500 children. She used to be an English teacher before and (…) when she fled to the Netherlands she was 58 years old. She spoke a fairly good Dutch, but not enough to give instructions in that language. […]. Together, we looked at a programme at the University of Applied Sciences in Utrecht, as they had opened a training programme for newcomers who wanted to work in education again. But then she had to travel three times per week from Middelburg to Utrecht. That was quite something. [Also] the transfer of her qualifications did not work because she did not master the instruction language in Dutch sufficiently." (interview with a representative of SIREE learning communities in Zeeland).*

Employer attitudes towards employing newcomers

The ability of local employers to mediate and deal with ethnic and cultural differences among their employees was also mentioned by a number of interviewees to play a role in the employment of newcomers. Stakeholders who support refugees in finding paid employment noted that there is a hesitation from employers to work with employees with a migration background - often related to the assumption that the language skills of the newcomers are not good enough to perform the job. Stakeholders, however, argue that such issues can be easily solved through an open attitude towards newcomers, and by providing basic information and instruction about the tasks in the languages the employees understand. In contrast to more urbanised regions, there is a lower familiarity with people having another ethnic and cultural background, which can also make it more difficult for newcomers to find employment.

Not many citizen and civil society initiatives have geared their activities towards employers; however, some focus on raising awareness on the role of local employers for the labour market position of migrant newcomers. One of these initiatives is the grassroot organisation *Colourful het Hogeland* in the province of Groningen. The initiative focused on providing information about diversity on the work floor and initiating dialogue and networking workshops between employers and newcomers. The aim is to move beyond assumptions and stereotypes. One of the representatives of Colourful het Hogeland reflects on her experience with a local employer:

> *"There was the example of Afghan woman, who wants to apply [for a job] at a hair salon. Well, I was a hairdresser before. [The woman asked] 'Do you know by any chance…' Well, of course I know…hairdressers in the area. I called them and: 'yes no [...], we have bad experiences with that'. [...]'But with what, do you have bad experiences?' 'Yes, no with … statushouders'. Then, I also said to her: 'I will try to convince you that this woman already lives in het Hogeland for years. And she is totally integrated […]'—but she was not open to it. And you know, I really wished for her to have the interview. And so that is really the stereotype that people have. You know…. And that they probably experienced a couple of times…and on the basis of your name [you are rejected]". (interview at Colourful het Hogeland, June 2021)*

In addition to civil society and citizen initiatives, employer service points (werkgeverservice punten) and regional labour market organisations of the Employee Insurance Agency (UWV) have initiated projects to facilitate labour market inclusion of recognised refugees and other migrants. In Limburg, the Employer Service Point North-Limburg, has for instance organised various events to match regional firms to recognised refugees seeking employment in the region.

Another example can be found in the experiences of one of the language coaches in one of the localities in the Achterhoek. Overall, there are many initiatives in the Netherlands where Dutch volunteers team up with newcomers to practise the Dutch language - *taalmaatjesprojecten*. One of the language coaches reflects on possibilities to allow newcomers to learn the Dutch language while participating in the labour market through paid employment. She notes that colleagues could engage newcomers easily during work and employers could set up a support /buddy system to learn the language and get acquainted with the Dutch work culture. Additionally, companies could offer language courses for newcomers at the end of the work day.

Paid employment, volunteering and devaluation of skills

Access to the labour market remains a challenge for many non-EU migrants, especially for those arriving in the Netherlands as a refugee. Quite often, it seems that employers are willing to offer volunteering

positions to newcomers, but do not offer paid employment contracts for the same work or the use of the same skills:

> *"One participant, a woman refugee from Syria, shared her experience with applying for a job in the care sector: when calling the potential employer to express her interest she was told that she would not have the required experience or diploma for the job. However, further on in the call she was offered to conduct similar tasks as an unpaid volunteer. Reflecting on the call in the group conversation she had, she remarks that she does have a lot of experience in caring, through her life and family obligations in the past. Yet those skills are not recognised by potential employers." (field notes)*

This experience was shared by many other newcomers across different shrinking regions. Their experiences and perspectives exemplify that their skills and talents were welcomed when they conducted the work as volunteers, yet, when trying to negotiate payment and employment their requests were rejected. Reasons mentioned were that they were not qualified enough or did not hold the right qualifications. Many newcomers seem to volunteer across a period of several months to even several years, while needing to rely on social welfare. In localities where the municipality prioritises fast employment over work tailored to the professional background and skills of newcomers, newcomers were sometimes discouraged to take up voluntary work. These observations resonate with research done on the experiences of refugees in other settings and localities in the Netherlands with the values, benefits and limitations of active participation through volunteering (see Ghorashi & Rast, 2018).

When speaking to representatives of the Dutch branch of the earlier mentioned Interreg project *In de zorg uit de zorgen (IDZ/UDZ),* they remarked that the goal is not so much *fast employment* but to allow for training towards longer term employment that aligns with the skills of newcomers. Here, we can see a combination of an encouragement of employment in a sector with a shortage of labour, while also investing in training and longer-term opportunities. This in contrast to the experiences various refugees noted, where they were directed to low-skilled work such as cleaning by the Employee Insurance Agency (UWV) or the organisations offering integration trajectories.

Social wellbeing

In the context of this study, social wellbeing is understood in relation to the social effects of shrinkage, neighbourhood contacts, social participation threshold and opportunities for co-creation. Rather than viewing migrant newcomers as a threat to social cohesion and requiring integration, we adopt a broad focus on emplacement, social relations and the organisation of modes of social life (Caglar & Glick Schiller 2018 p.20, p.23). Migrants and other residents are understood as social actors who are integral to place-making and whose local engagements can contribute to revitalisation (2018, p. 5).

The social effects of shrinkage in the Netherlands

Social issues that can arise with shrinkage are a weak social structure, decreased social cohesion and increased polarisation and anti-immigrant sentiments (Steenbekkers et al., 2017). At the same time, in many shrinking areas there is wide engagement and participation of residents who volunteer in different kinds of organisations and there are many bottom-up initiatives to meet the challenges of a fading (or never existing) infrastructure (Meijer & van der Krabben, 2018). Those most affected by shrinkage and spatial

marginalisation are not only vulnerable elderly people and adolescents (Steenbekkers & Vermeij, 2017; Steenbekkers et al., 2017) but also those who are new to these localities.

Importance and the limits of neighbourly relations and encounters

As shrinking regions are characterised by a decrease in public services such as public transport, local grocery shops or educational institutions, locals depend much on each other. Some welcoming initiatives respond to 'shrinking public spaces' others are more narrowly focused on helping newcomers access public services and opportunities for social inclusion. Some welcoming initiatives, such as *Link Nederweert* in Limburg, *Colourful het Hogeland* in Groningen and smaller-scale projects in Middelburg, focus on organising meet-ups and local welcoming communities.

Some welcoming initiatives create greater opportunities for neighbourly encounters and meetups, others also work towards creating physical community spaces. The initiative *Life Beside the Brewery* in Gulpen organises a variety of recurring activities, such as language and repair cafés, as well as activities for elderly residents from the community space 'Hoeskamer' (dialect for living room). In the municipality Gulpen-Wittem there are currently seven 'hoeskamers', community spaces created by this citizen-initiative.

Figure 13: Flyer of Colourful Hogeland to promote Neighbour Day 2022

In addition to organising events and activities, local coordinators of welcoming initiatives often support a great number of individuals with practical issues, such as responding to bureaucratic requests, dealing with paperwork etc. This support is not only pragmatic, but also underpinned by principled motivations. Our interlocutors often spoke about their normative ideas about arrival and emplacement, as one of our interlocutors illustrated:

> *"Well at the beginning... when I was at Colourful [...] we actually only did fun things in the sense of being on Mooi Bedum, selling snacks, things like that. And I found that very brief basic. To be sure, you can promote your country through food, dance and music or show people how you are doing. But I missed the information exchange. I think that's what it is all about. They would like us all to become one. That is only possible if people get good information. How does it work here in the Netherlands, why do we vote, what about the political debates.... Those are very difficult and boring topics, but important to know. Such as, how does it work at schools, how do you register your child, how do you register with an employment agency. Well, little things like that. How does it work with parents' evenings at school... It sounds like very boring things, but all this is very important."*

Several interlocutors spoke about finding the right balance between organising inclusive, bottom-up meetups and providing information and support. In Nederweert (Limburg), one of our interlocutors gave the example of Dutch conversation sessions organised by the welcoming initiative Link Nederweert. These conversation sessions were meant to complement 'formal' language programmes and coaching offered by schools and public libraries. The coordinator explained he did not want to adopt the role of a 'teacher' but wanted to facilitate spontaneous conversations. When participants used the meetups to talk in Arabic, however, he faced a dilemma, as the idea of the organisers had been to offer an inclusive, safe meeting space to practise Dutch. In this case, the coordinators decided to work with cultural guides and mediators who translated the Arabic, so meetings could remain bilingual.

Participation thresholds and barriers

In Middelburg, a citizen initiative similarly sought to complement state support and the existing language coaching programmes. Schools and public libraries organise language coaching and activities during the work-day, in part to ensure that parents can attend the activities during their childrens' school time. However, for others, this timing and the location of such activities pose a problem. The former coordinators of the citizen initiative, *Taalcafé de Herberg* in Middelburg, themselves working at an international university, therefore sought to create an opportunity for social meetups after work hours in the city centre in a local café. This small-scale initiative is supported by the café/restaurant owners who offered the organisers a meeting space. The local university and the municipality offered financial support. This example illustrates how even the smallest initiatives interact with the context and strive for a local impact by minimising spatial and temporal barriers to social participation.

In the neighbouring region, in the village of Vogelwaarde in Zeeland-Flanders, we observed how another citizen initiative emerged in response to thresholds to participation. As the coordinators of this initiative *Vogelwaarde Helps*, explained, many residents struggle with the compounded effects of insufficient public transport access and 'transport poverty'. The coordinators, therefore, initially began to help recently settled refugees access essential public facilities such as health care services. Sometimes by organising transport, but also by making sure information about community-organised transport options is available in other languages. In other places, welcoming initiatives organised biking lessons for newcomers who depend on public transport. These welcoming initiatives thus shape individual emplacement experiences and contribute to collective emplacement infrastructures and opportunities.

Coordinators, volunteers and residents stressed that community initiatives came into existence to minimise such thresholds, but also explained that these thresholds continue to mould emplacement experiences. Sometimes coordinators face general participation thresholds, shared by many members of the community, others are specific to the experiences of migrant newcomers. An example of a common challenge is the shrinking space for social participation as a result of declining and diminishing public transport infrastructures. An example of a specific threshold is that information on how to access essential public

services is often only available in the Dutch language. Another factor that was sometimes mentioned in interviews relates to transnational family care. Some volunteers and coordinators explained the low turnout of migrant newcomers in some local events with reference to transnational care commitments, stating that they frequently hear about refugees' concerns about relatives that stayed-behind in the country of origin. Another recurring explanation is that migrant workers who work long shifts, six days a week, often do not have much time to participate in local intercultural events, particularly when they are organised during work hours.

Volunteering

Volunteering is integral to sustaining welcoming initiatives. Initiatives for and/or by migrant newcomers are often created and run by residents in rural shrinking areas, in many cases subsidised by public funds. People *care* for *their* initiatives and are committed to investing time and work. Much work is done on a voluntary basis, sometimes fully unpaid, other times rewarded with a small monetary compensation, a training or a gift voucher. Public and private funding are mostly limited or temporary.

The ongoing commitment of volunteers is vital to the social wellbeing of both long-term inhabitants and migrant newcomers. This commitment links to a spirit of neighbourliness, high degree of mutual support, charity and social control in these small localities scattered across shrinking regions. These values influence and motivate locals - new and old - to volunteer over long periods of time, picking up additional tasks spontaneously, and thereby making initiatives for and/or by migrants economically viable. However, when zooming in on the individual level, voluntary engagement is more viable for people of some social positions than for others. While some people engage voluntarily out of a place of relative socioeconomic security (e.g., people in their pension, homeowners), others, many of which are migrant newcomers, specifically refugees, engage from a position of socioeconomic precarity. We can observe a paradox between seeming communal economic viability and individual precarity.

The underlying motivations of migrant newcomers and long-term inhabitants engaged in volunteer labour may vary. Some migrants initially saw taking up volunteering as an opportunity to work and as a step towards paid employment in the longer term (which is not always the case as stated earlier). Moreover, social control and expectations from the community may play a role in taking up volunteering work. In some of the selected municipalities, municipal social welfare coaches have at times also discouraged volunteering in the case of migrants and residents who depend on social welfare. Instead, they have insisted on finding paid work, even when this is temporary, precarious, and not suited to professional backgrounds or leading to sustainable labour market inclusion in the long run.

Fragility of citizen-led welcoming initiatives

Initiatives that focus on social wellbeing, particularly citizen-led initiatives, tend to organise particular activities, such as events focused on language. This stands in contrast with everyday sociabilities around the house, in the workplace or institutions, such as schools, faith-based organisations (Caglar & Glick Schiller 2018). The example from Nederweert, highlights how tensions can arise between citizen-coordinated events and participants' need for spontaneous, social activities. There are also power dynamics at play, particularly when the coordination of activities rests solely on the shoulders of elderly long-term residents (see the quote below from an interview with one of the coordinators).

"*A disadvantage is that our organisation depends on people, board members, who are all 65+ years old. We have a chairman who is 80, so someone else has to step up. This whole thing, it does end up hanging on a limited number of crucial people.*"

In this respect, the student initiative (STAR) in Middelburg is interesting, because it was established by international students who organise social activities *with* refugees staying in the temporary emergency shelter in Middelburg. A challenge here has been how to sustain the initiative when both students and refugees keep moving on to other places within and beyond the Netherlands. In the case of refugees because they are relocated to other refugee reception shelters or allocated housing elsewhere, while students continue their postgraduate studies or take up work elsewhere.

Political Stability and Political Climate

Political stability, in the context of this study, is understood broadly in relation to the legitimacy, continuity and effectiveness of democratic, political institutions (see Widmaier 1990) and trust in political institutions. This understanding, therefore, invites broader questions about effective governance, rule of law, the stability and strength of democratic institutions as well as governance dynamics (intergovernmental cooperation and conflicts). Political stability is a precondition for effective and consistent policy implementation. It also moulds the possibilities for migrants' emplacement, migrants' and citizens' participation in political affairs and their involvement in welcoming initiatives in shrinking regions. The following analysis touches upon developments at the national scale, as well as local and regional issues relevant to shrinking regions with regard to political trust, political tensions and populist movements, political mobilisations and opportunities for political participation.

Political trust

Political trust in national and European institutions has deteriorated overall in the Netherlands, but this trend seems to be stronger in peripheral regions (Steenbekkers et al. 2017, p. 61.). The Hague, as the political and administrative centre is considered geographically and mentally on the other side of the country. Specifically, in the face of infrastructural and environmental challenges, locals in peripheral and shrinking regions feel that their interests are forgotten by the national government. In figure 11, we see differing degrees of political trust in different shrinking areas with political trust being lowest in (amongst others) shrinking areas like (Zuid) Limburg, Oost Groningen and north South-West of Friesland but slightly higher in some parts of Groningen, the Achterhoek and Zeeland. When it comes to trust in the central government and national politics, the picture is therefore differentiated because there are some shrinking areas in which political trust seem to be higher than in others.

Research shows trust in local politics and local authorities tends to be higher than the trust in national politics and the central government. However, electoral research suggests that trust in local politics and local government is also waning in some peripheral regions (Harmsen, 2022).

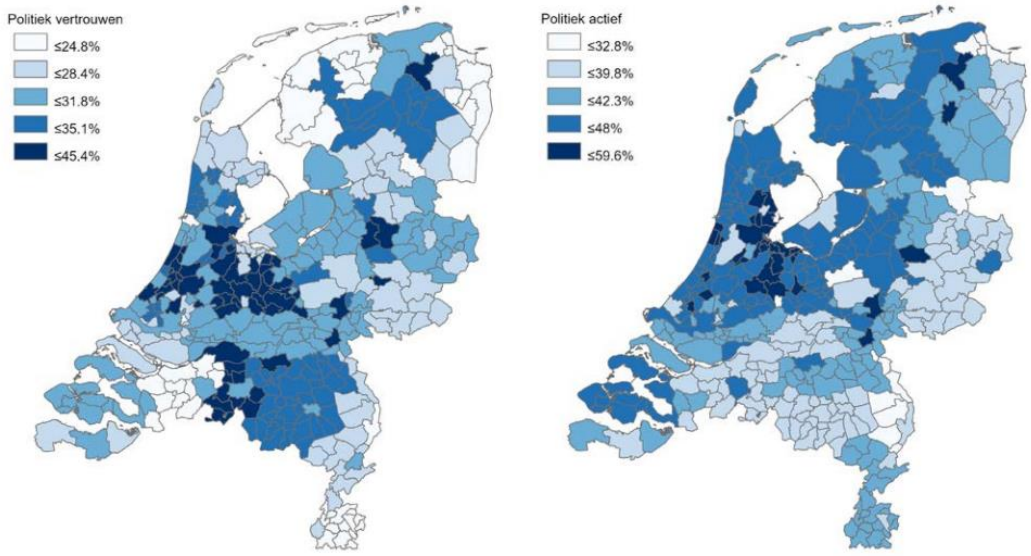

Figure 15 Political trust (left) and Figure 16 political activity (right) between 2013-2016, source PON & Telos, data CBS, adapted from Voogd & Cuperus, 2021, p.32

Political Tensions and populist movements

In the past elections in the Netherlands, some regional divisions become clear, with overall more support for left-wing and progressive parties in the urban centres of the Randstad and an increasing support for right-wing parties in some peripheral regions, as in parts of Groningen and Friesland, Zeeland, Limburg and the Achterhoek (see figure 11). Considering the "shift to the right" in many peripheral regions of the country in the 2021 elections of the national parliament (Tweede Kamer) De Voogd and Cuperus (2021) speak of a "'peripheralisation' of the protest vote" (p. 14)—considering voting for right wing populist parties as a protest vote (p.76, 77).

Radical right parties in the Netherlands typically oppose immigration and are known for both hidden and open racist claims and positions. In popular Dutch discourses a division can be found between the urban centres and the peripheral regions; the latter area often associated with populist right wing parties and racism. Media often magnify protests against asylum seeker centres (Harteveld et al. 2021; Zorlu, 2017). However, there is no x evidence that communities in non-urbanised, mostly rural areas are by default more prone to racist or anti-immigrant sentiments. In a recent study Harteveld and colleagues (2021: 12) conclude that

> *"it is relevant to note that PVV support is not substantially higher in either urban, semi-urban or rural areas (…). Despite some popular depictions, PRR support (at least in the Dutch case) is neither purely a backlash of rural areas against the urban centre, nor only driven by an urbanised (former) working class. PRR parties draw support from both the countryside and the cities." (Harteveld et al. 2021, p. 12).*

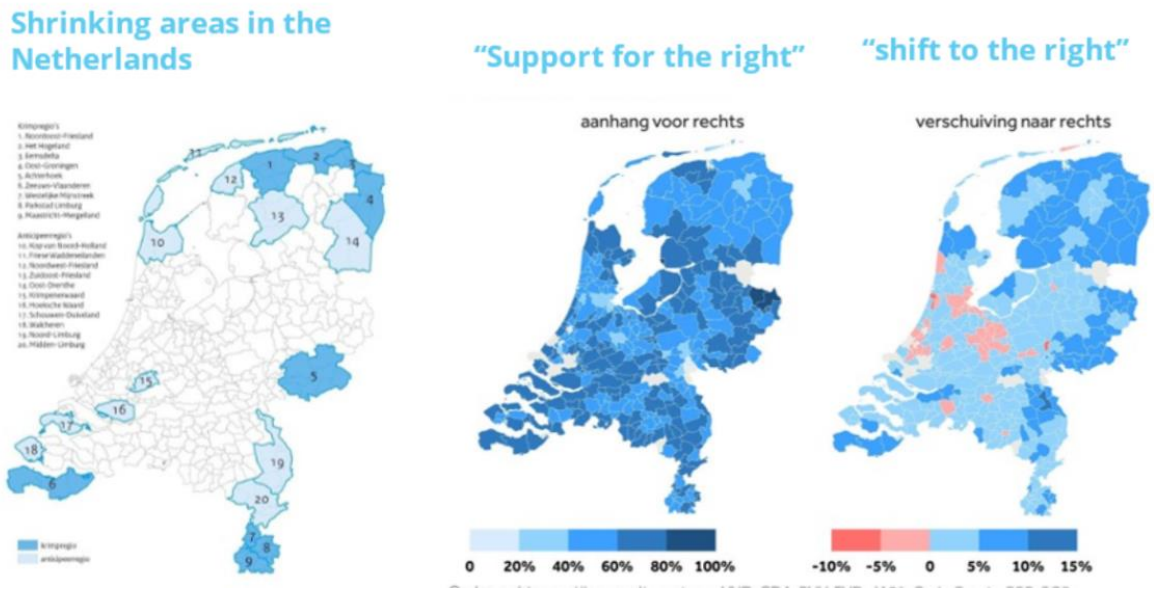

Figure 17: Map on the left: shrinking areas in the Netherlands (source: national government), maps in the centre describe results in the past national elections (March 2021, "Tweede Kamerverkiezingen"): centre map on support for the right and map on the right the shift to the right (NOS, 2021)

According to Harteveld et al. (2021), support for populist radical right-wing parties in these regions is mainly determined by marginalisation:

> *"Across rural areas, populist attitudes are strongest in areas experiencing local marginalisation, especially in areas where few young people remain. By contrast, low public and private service availability (Block, 2016) does not predict populist attitudes or anti-immigration views. The number of immigrants, or the increase thereof, is simply too low to explain much of the variation in PRR support across rural and semi-urban areas." (Harteveld et al. 2021, p. 17)*

In all municipalities included in this study, populist right parties have entered municipal politics and were elected to the municipal council (see Figure 16). In six out of nine municipalities, populist parties PVV and FVD received a higher number of votes in the municipal council elections than the national average. That said, in none of the municipalities populist parties entered into a coalition to form a local government.

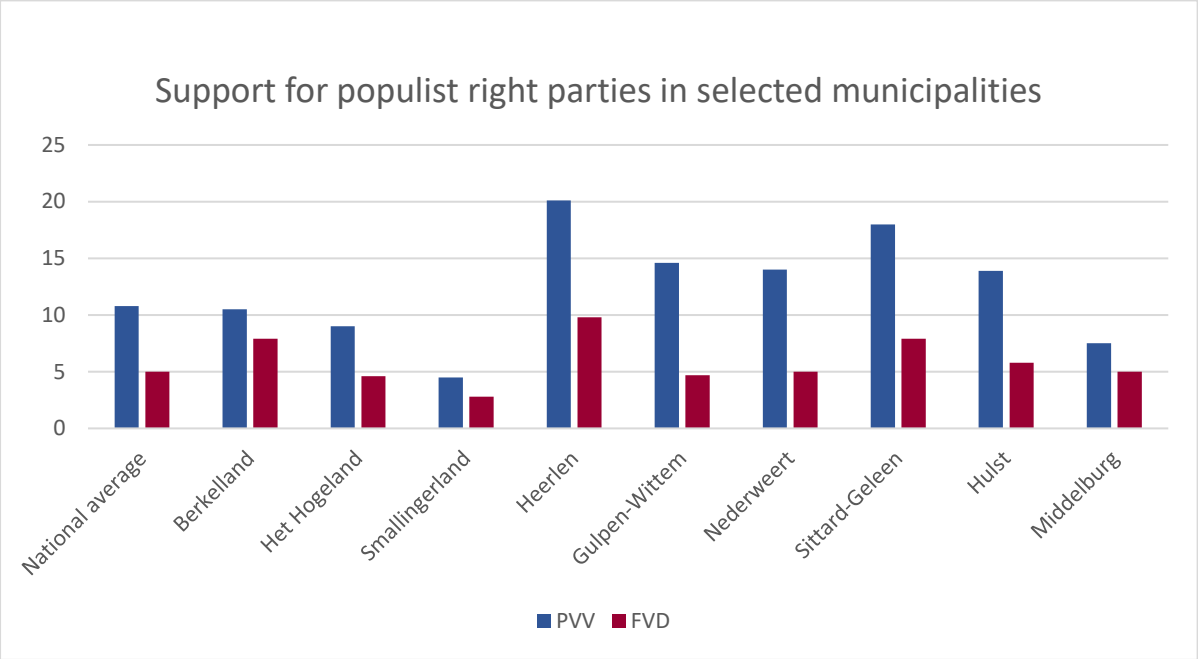

Figure 18: support for populist right parties in selected municipalities based on verkiezingsuitslagen.nl (2022)

Welcoming initiatives and political mobilisations

From the perspective of the above-mentioned political tensions and dynamics, the emergence of welcoming spaces may be affected in at least two ways. Firstly, right wing populist parties and their discourses are on the rise across the country and specifically in peripheralised and marginalised shrinking regions. Anti-immigrant positions are increasingly "out there" and likely to influence those exposing themselves to the discourses and ideas of right-wing populist parties. Moreover, refugees are often framed and perceived as a threat in the competition over already scarce resources such as social housing in this context. This may also have an effect on the attitudes towards migrants and the willingness to create "Welcoming Spaces". Although often in a hidden fashion, negative discourses about migrants may also influence the treatment of migrant participants in initiatives.

Secondly, the support of radical right and populist parties in shrinking areas can be understood as a consequence of rural or regional marginalisation and as not a reaction to the presence of migrants. As De Voogd and Cuperus (2021) suggest in their analysis of this 'peripheralisation of discontent', protest populism in the periphery is not primarily, or hardly at all, about migration, but mainly about the disappearance of public services and the resulting feelings of frustration.[4] While this broader (shrinking) context is not always evident or explicated in local discussions on migration, various local stakeholders have also made this point. For instance, between 2015-2016 many mayors organised public meetings with residents to build local support for asylum governance. During this period, there were fierce protests against plans to open an asylum seeker centre in some localities. In these municipalities, mayors sought to reassure residents by organising informal talks with residents, rather than one-way-street information sessions. As one mayor in a non-shrinking municipality explained during an expert meeting organised by the Ministry of Social and Economic Affairs:

[4] See de Voogd & Couperus (2021) p. 76 of Atlas van Afgehaakt Nederland.

> *"During these discussions that we had with people after the crisis surrounding the opening of an asylum seeker centre, it turned out that everyone had his or her own story. From a language deficiency to debt problems. Some people hadn't felt heard by the municipality for years. Actually, this sentiment did not have that much to do with the refugee shelter. That was only the last straw."* Former mayor of Geldermalsen (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2018)

The most recent example of protests against the arrival of forced migrants in the selected municipalities comes from Het Hogeland. In this municipality, a temporary emergency arrival centre was opened on a military base (Zoutkamp) in 2022. After the opening of this emergency facility, there were reports in local, regional and national media about residents' concerns about safety and public order disturbances. On the 25th of October 2022, the leader of the largest far-right populist party (PVV), Geert Wilders travelled to the village of Zoutkamp in the municipality Het Hogeland. At the same, a meeting was taking place with the mayor of the municipality and representatives of the Centralised Reception Agency for Asylum Seekers (COA) who had invited residents to discuss their questions and concerns. There was no meeting between the mayor and the leader of the far-right party. While the mayor continued his conversations with locals, the far-right politician spoke to crowds outside. This example illustrates how local debates on the arrival of forced migrants are not only shaped by the dynamics within the municipal council, but also by (social) media representations and nationally elected far-right parties.

On the other side of the spectrum, we found examples of political mobilisations in support of migrants and migrants' rights in shrinking regions that are directed to national anti-immigration discourses. An example here is, the *Kamp Morra* initiative (Figure 17). Kamp Morra was a public art intervention, a temporary installation in a Frisian field to visualise local and regional support for a refugee rights and solidarity campaign that drew attention to the plight of unaccompanied refugee minors in camps in Greece.

Figure 19: Kamp Morra (2021), solidarity initiative, photographic materials kampmorra.nl

Political participation

If we zoom in on the nine selected municipalities, there are very few migrant organisations that are actively participating in political debates or processes. However, in some shrinking regions, there are migrant organisations active on a regional level, such as the Provincial Platform for Diversity (PPD). During the 2022 municipal elections, the Provincial Platform for Diversity (PPD), the Interreligious Platform Sittard-Geleen and the Foundation More Colour and Quality organised a political discussion night with municipal council candidates. One of the core activities of PPD is to advise local and regional authorities. Over the years, it has also advised the municipalities Heerlen and Sittard-Geleen that are included in this study. This advisory role is not (yet) institutionally embedded, in the sense that there is no advisory council (for instance) in both municipalities. However, there are informal links. The chairperson of PMM is also active as a 'future ambassador' in the municipality Sittard-Geleen. In this capacity, he participates in meetings and

gives input on the vision and implementation of the municipality in the field of diversity.[5] PMM is based in Sittard.

Another example of a migrant organisation with a regional scope and impact is the Foundation More Colour and Quality (Stichting Meer Kleur en Kwaliteit, SMKK). SMKK is based in Sittard-Geleen and focuses on the participation of migrant and refugee women and girls at the local and regional scale. A third example from this region is the consultancy company New Insights of Nouran Ahmed Serag. New Insights has advised various municipalities on diversity and civic integration policies and was a key player in the development of work-learning trajectories, such as the one developed in the WOOW project.

In other shrinking regions and municipalities, community organisers with a migrant background play an important role, albeit less visibly, as coordinators of welcoming initiatives (Hogeland), municipal welfare officials (Hogeland) or as 'cultural connectors' (Berkelland). These forms of engagement tend to focus on everyday implementation of municipal policies in the field of work, participation and civic integration, rather than political agenda setting or participation in political institutions and bodies (such as the municipal council).

In the Achterhoek, eight municipalities and the labour market region work with more than twenty 'key persons', people who originally arrived in the region as a migrant or refugee and now work as cultural connectors, facilitating communication between recognised refugees, municipalities and other actors. While the Achterhoek approach was evaluated by a research institute which identified it as a best practice, the project has not been without challenges. Some of these challenges are specific to rural municipalities. As the coordinator explained in a public interview (Mudde, 2022),

> *"In not every municipality there are such key figures, so they have to travel quite a bit. That's why I sometimes envy big cities, at least there the distances are smaller. And key figures also create their own networks through this work and then find work, then we lose them. Sometimes volunteering is so intensive that it has to become a paid job. We are looking for ways to organise this properly in the region." Divosa coordinator Achterhoek, as cited by Mudde (2022)*

So far these examples focused on policy implementation and less on participation in political-decision making. In the selected municipalities there are no political advisory boards, such as migrant advisory councils. In some of the larger Dutch metropoles, such advisory bodies have been established to develop more effective inclusionary policy measures for recognised refugees. Moreover, the municipal councils in these 9 municipalities suffer from an overrepresentation of white, elderly residents, most often male. This resonates with broader trends and national averages, as approximately 30% of the municipal councillors are women and only 7% is younger than 30 years (Nederlandse Vereniging voor Raadsleden, 2022).

[5] See beleidsplan PPD, https://ppdlimburg.nl/bestanden/20210929ppdwerkplan-2022def.pdf

4. Links to further WPs

WP2 History, Geography, Positionality

The 9 municipalities included in this study are located in 9 different regions that have been designated as shrinking or anticipated shrinking regions (see table 2). It is beyond the scope of this study to offer a comprehensive discussion of the history, geography and positionality of each of these regions. The following overview provides a general overview of key characteristics and developments in terms of migration to and revitalisation of these regions.

Walcheren and Zeeland-Flanders in Zeeland (Middelburg and Hulst)
Two municipalities included in this study, Hulst and Middelburg are located in the Dutch province of Zeeland, in the Southwest of the country. While Zeeland is the smallest province in terms of population size, it is marked by stark regional differences between various sub-regions, some of which are former islands. The Walcheren region, for instance, includes three very different municipalities: two small cities, Vlissingen and Middelburg and a rural municipality, Veere. All three municipalities are popular tourist destinations. The port of Vlissingen is the 3rd port in the country and it is home to major ship manufacturing and building companies (see also Miellet 2022). The economic activities of the nearby town of Middelburg, which is included in this report, revolve around metallurgic industries, the manufacturing sector, the service sector and tourism. On the other side of the Scheldt Estuary is the sub-region Zeeland Flanders. Compared to other parts of Zeeland this sub-region is especially affected by demographic developments such as shrinkage and selective out- migration. Zeeland Flanders, which consists of three municipalities, Hulst, Terneuzen and Sluis is also associated with peripheralisation because its main connection to the central peninsula of Zeeland is through a toll tunnel and a ferry. The fact that residents have to pay to use this tunnel is something that has been fiercely debated in regional and national politics. Zeeland-Flanders is a border region and it is home to a sizable Belgian community. The area has also attracted a lot of labour migrants who have settled in the region to work in the ship manufacturing and petrochemical industries.
Achterhoek (Berkelland)

The Achterhoek is a rural region in the Eastern part of the Netherlands, located in the province of Gelderland, incorporating 8 municipalities. It is a rural region with many villages, some hamlets and medium-sized cities with an economy driven by small (manufacturing) industries, distribution services and agriculture (Meijer & Syssner, 2017). Like other peripheral and border regions, it is facing depopulation, ageing and selective outmigration of young people (Meijer & Syssner, 2017). The relatively small size of the region and number of municipalities, are perhaps one of the reasons why local authorities in the region have often collaborated on regional challenges related to shrinkage. The Achterhoek region was also one of the first where municipalities began to experiment with outsourcing tasks to local communities (Meijer & Syssner, 2017). To arrange this, policy schemes and subsidy programmes were created to stimulate local communities to take over former municipal tasks. The region is known for its proud culture of self-organisation, also known as 'Noaberschap' (neighbourhoodness) (Beunen, Meijer & de Vries, 2020). In terms of demographic developments, it was a relative latecomer to debates on shrinkage and when population decline appeared on national political agendas, the region was not experiencing the same rate of decline as other Dutch regions (Beunen, Meijer & de Vries, 2020). This report focused on one municipality in the Achterhoek region, the municipality of Berkelland.

Eastern Groningen (Het Hogeland)

The municipality Het Hogeland is located in the Northeast of the province of Groningen. Many of its villages are not far from the regional capital and university town of Groningen, which has a growing and young population. This urban centre stands in stark contrast with the eastern part of the province, which has faced population decline for many years. In the 1990s, population decline was a prominent issue at the local level and at the provincial level it garnered increasing attention since the mid-2000s (Beunen, Meijer & de Vries, 2020).

In terms of surface area, the municipality het Hogeland is the second largest in the country and incorporates 40 villages. It stretches from the Wadden Sea wetlands and the industrial Eemshaven port to open grasslands with winding dikes in the south. The dark and red bricks of many local buildings are testimony to the region's once-flourishing brick industry and its sea-clay soil. Part of the municipality has been affected by the adverse consequences of decades-long gas extraction from the Groningen gas field. This Groningen Gas controversy is a fiercely contested political issue and the region has therefore also become a symbol of peripherality and of the growing divide between the urban Randstad area and peripheral border regions.
An important driver of regional economy is the Eems port in the northeast of the municipality. Around a third of all the energy that is produced in the Netherlands comes from Eemshaven. The port houses the largest wind park on land and plays a prominent role in the construction of wind parks at sea. In addition to upscaling the Eemshaven, the provincial and local governments have also agreed to develop a commercial zone to attract firms, particularly those working on the green energy transition. The municipality also hosts a mega data centre of Google and the Ministry of Housing decided in 2022 that in only two municipalities, one being Het Hogeland, future data centres can be build. The reason behind this is that the most important internet exchange point in Europe is located in the Eemshaven, eleven of the fifteen internet cables that connect Europe and the United States meet there from the sea on the land. The port has also been a prime location for the development of innovative technologies for bio-energy resources (green gas, bio-methanol etc.).

South-Limburg (Gulpen-Wittem and Heerlen), Central-Limburg (Sittard-Geleen and Nederweert)

The province of Limburg is located in the south of the Netherlands and borders Germany and Belgium. Historically, the region's economy was shaped by coal mining. The mining industry has left a strong mark on the region. In the 1970s the last coal mines closed in the region, leaving many locals unemployed and with little prospects or compensation. Like Zeeland and Groningen, Limburg is a province with stark regional differences. The north and middle parts of the province are known for its agricultural sector, while the southern regions are more urbanised and popular tourists destinations (Beunen, Meijer & de Vries, 2020). Apart from varying economic activities, these sub-regions are also differently affected by demographic developments, such as population decline (Verwest, 2011). It was only in the mid-2000s that population decline was acknowledged as a problem affecting the liveability of the region (Beunen, Meijer & de Vries, 2020). Another thing that sets the four 'Limburg' municipalities included in this report apart, is that they have varying histories with welcoming international migrants. In the urban municipalities Sittard-Geleen and Heerlen the share of the population with a migrant background is close to the national average. Smaller municipalities, in the region have also attracted a lot of EU labour migrants. Heerlen and Sittard-Geleen, included in this study are part of the top-10 municipalities where EU labour migrants work (Decisio, 2022). Compared to national averages (33%), the region is home to many short-stay (EU) migrants staying for fewer than four months (40%) (Decision, 2022). Some of the municipalities in the region, such as Nederweert, were relatively early with developing policy measures to regulate housing of international/European workers.

WP3 Policy, rules and governance

In terms of migration governance, the Dutch context is characterised by a high degree of *institutionalisation* and complex *multi-level governance arrangements*. For some groups of migrants, integration policies have been in place for decades although they were changed by various governments. When it comes to migration, there is no uniform 'migration policy', but rather extensive policy frameworks for various fields (asylum governance, refugee integration, labour migration). It is beyond the scope of this discussion to outline all different policy frameworks and agendas. Moreover, comprehensive overviews have been produced in other contexts (see for instance, the Asylum in Europe Country Reports). This discussion outlines key trends and developments in migration governance that bear relevance to welcoming initiatives in shrinking regions.

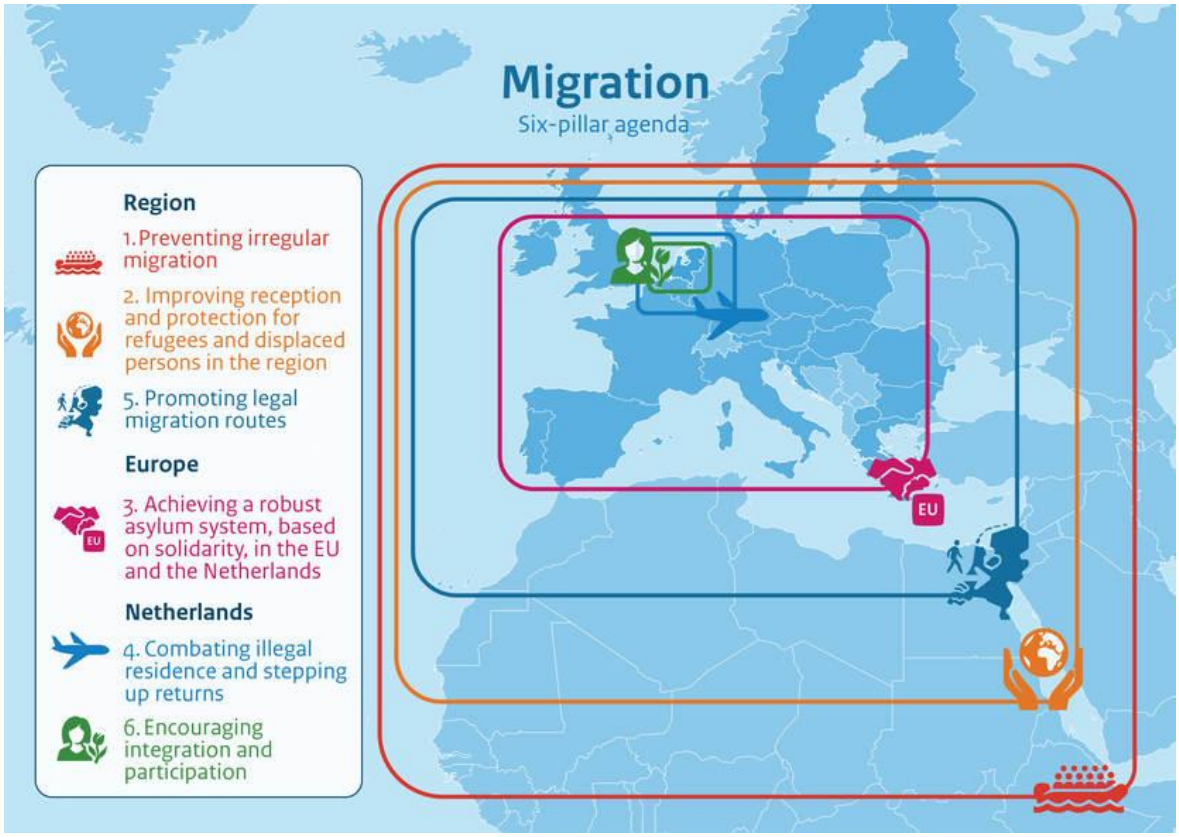

Figure 20: Government of the Netherlands (2018)

Forced Migration

The reception of asylum seekers falls under the responsibility of the *Ministry of Justice and Security* and is organised by the *Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers* (COA). Municipalities and other local actors, therefore, are primarily indirectly involved and they have a limited sphere of influence when it comes to the accommodations of asylum seekers. This changed in March 2022, when local authorities became responsible for the accommodation of forced migrants from Ukraine. Dutch local authorities are responsible for providing housing and other social support to recognised refugees.

With regard to *forced migration*, there are three developments that are relevant to welcoming spaces in shrinking regions. These four developments are 1) the asylum governance crisis, 2) the debates on the

Dutch dispersal policy 3) the decentralisation of relevant competences and 4) the introduction of specialised housing schemes.

First, municipalities negotiate with the *Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers* (COA) and this also presents opportunities for the shrinking localities. In recent years, structural capacity issues and a shortage of accommodations have resulted in an ongoing asylum governance crisis. In 2022, the ministry announced it is planning a legal reform which makes participation in asylum governance mandatory for all Dutch municipalities. This decision drew criticisms from various sides, but what remains comparatively underexplored is whether the planning of new reception facilities can mutually benefit refugees and other local residents. In some localities[6], COA and the municipality are experimenting with spatial designs that also create value for surrounding neighbourhoods. Something that begs further exploration is how local actors in shrinking localities may be involved in such negotiations and processes.

Asylum seeker centres are often located in peripheral locations, either on the outskirts of cities or in rural regions. This impacts on refugees' possibilities for participation and inclusion. Recognised refugees are required to stay in various large-scale asylum-seeker centres before they settle down in a municipality. Since 2015, various attempts have been made to work towards a regional matching system, where refugees' asylum accommodations are located in the same region as the municipality where they will settle down. The idea is that this enables 'early integration' because they can enrol in language and professional training and build a social network sooner. In practice, however, such regional placement and matching continue to be difficult to organise. This debate on the Dutch dispersal policy and the regional settlement of refugees is therefore the second development of relevance to welcoming initiatives in shrinking regions.

The discussion on regional settlement tends to focus on the benefits to integration and not on refugees' contribution to social and political life in settlement localities. For instance, some local actors stress the importance of participation in local associations, such as sport clubs, but always tie this to integration and rarely to refugees' contribution to social life in these localities. When refugees' contributions to regional revitalisation are considered, this is often in relation to labour market shortages and with a view of matching refugees' professional backgrounds to regional labour markets.

The third development concerns the decentralisation of key policy areas such as civic integration to the local level which has increasingly placed local authorities 'in the lead' when it comes to inclusionary measures for migrants. In 2022, a new civic integration policy framework came into force, which gives local authorities greater responsibilities and financial resources to stimulate recognised refugees' civic integration. Before the implementation of the amended Civic Integration Act, many municipalities developed ad-hoc inclusionary measures to support recognised refugees. Some of these local initiatives were adopted nationwide and incorporated into the new legal framework (see Oomen et al. 2021). Such policy experimentation was also stimulated. In 2019, the Association of Directors of Social Services (DIVOSA), started a pilot programme that supported municipalities to pilot new approaches to civic integration. In the shrinking region of the Achterhoek, the municipality of Berkelland participated in this programme, where it focused on family migration, gender and emancipation. These pilot projects were evaluated by independent research institutes. One of the things these reports show, is that there needs to be greater awareness for the impact of geographical factors on both social wellbeing and governance.

[6] See for instance: https://www.binnenlandsbestuur.nl/sociaal/azc-oisterwijk-voorbeeld-voor-andere-gemeenten

Labour migration

While the focus of Welcoming Spaces is on the settlement of migrants from non-EU countries, it should be noted that the housing of migrant workers from EU member states is increasingly becoming a salient political issue in the Netherlands, including in shrinking regions. There are approximately 600.000 migrant workers from EU countries in the Netherlands and the precarious positions of some of them have sparked political debates. The Dutch Association of Municipalities (VNG) plays an important role and supports local authorities to develop local approaches to improve the living situation of migrant workers. It launched a migrant worker support program and established a support team to help municipalities implement recommendations from government reports.

Another trend in the area of migration is the emergence of regional multi-level governance partnerships, such as international welcome centres, to support international workers. In Groningen, an 'International Welcome Center' was established in 2015 by the municipality of Groningen, the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), the University of Groningen, and the Connect International Foundation. There is also an 'Expat Center' in the east of the country, in Hengelo with a slightly narrower focus on highly-skilled migrants. Similarly, the Expat Center in Zeeland was established in 2019 and focuses on expats and labour migrants. Although most of such 'welcome centres' focus on highly skilled migrants, some have a broader and more inclusive approach, such as the International Welcome Center North. This welcome centre also supports forced migrants from Ukraine and offers useful information such as the 'monitor report on internationals' (2020). such as on the average length of residence of different categories of migrants (highly skilled international workers, other migrant workers and recognised refugees).

Welcoming initiatives, local authorities, migration governance and revitalisation programs

In some localities, such as Berkelland and Hulst, municipal actors are intensifying municipal efforts to attract foreign workers or to keep newcomers in the region. Beyond these specific localities, expat and welcome centres play an important role in some areas that are experiencing shrinkage or peripheralisation. In Zeeland, the *Expat Center* targets labour migrants, but not refugee newcomers. The *International Welcome Center North* for Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen, focuses on high-skilled migrants and EU (blue card) employees, but has recently also begun to support refugees from Ukraine.

Figure 21: Expat Center Zeeland (left) and International Welcome Center North

In several localities, welcoming initiatives are embedded in local policies. Embedded in this context means not only that welcoming initiatives receive financial support from local or regional authorities, but that these

welcoming initiatives are linked to the implementation of local government competencies, such civic integration. We can see this clearly, for instance, in the case of the municipality Het Hogeland, where the municipal memo on the Vakland Hogeland initiative[7] explicitly states how the initiative addresses local and regional challenges that result from shrinkage. Another example is that of the municipality of Hulst, which was already highlighted in this report in the discussion on training and transition trajectories in the care sector. In Hulst, the welcoming initiative of Tragel is linked, not to local government competencies in the field of civic integration, but connected to the local economic policy framework.

Some training and transition trajectories for recognised refugees and other newcomers in designated economic sectors were developed as part of broader regional revitalisation efforts. Vakland Hogeland has received funding from the National Program Groningen, a partnership of the national government, province of Groningen and municipalities. [8] The project initiated by Tragel in Zeeland Flanders and the broader project, Care Home of the Future are supported by the Region Deal Zeeland Flanders through the 'Zeeuwen zelf aan zet' initiative. Similarly, the WOOW project is linked to Region Deal Park City Limburg.

Dutch shrinking and revitalisation policies

Since the early 2000s, governments and societal actors are increasingly aware that various Dutch regions face structural population decline, which impacts on the social-economic development of mostly rural and peripheral regions (Verwest and van Dam, 2010). Also, policy-makers increasingly realised that population decline would be difficult to reverse - none of the regions so far had been successful in attracting new populations and triggered by the 2008 economic crisis the 'growth thinking' discourse slowly was abandoned. Instead, 'smart shrinkage' and 'civic engagement' became the new policy strategies for coping with (opposed to countering) the consequences of population decline (Hospers, 2014). In 2009, shrinkage was acknowledged by the national government as a structural problem, with far-reaching consequences for regional development and liveability (VROM et.al. 2009). As such, regions with severe, but projected, decline rates (12.5 % population decline until 2040) got the label 'krimpregio' (shrinking region), or 'anticipeerregio' (anticipating region, in the case of limited and projected decline: 5 % until 2040) - see figure 7 for an overview of shrinking and anticipating regions. These labels soon became synonymous for the definition of 'shrinkage', also in academic terms. However, it is important to stress that these labels are political constructs, and not objective conceptualisations. It is now, e.g., widely acknowledged that the Achterhoek region, first designated as 'anticipeerregio', successfully lobbied at national level for the label 'krimpregio' which is accompanied with additional funding and support for dealing with population decline (Kahila et.al. 2022).

The national policies for shrinking and anticipating regions consists of three pillars, explicitly focused at a regional and multi-stakeholder approach (Ministry of Interior, 2016): housing, concentrating and merging facilities, and maintaining economic activities (see Figure 20). After 2018 the policy focus shifted from concentration and merging facilities to maintaining facilities (through local initiatives) as much as possible in shrinking regions, and digital accessibility was added as means to increased accessibility for economic development and liveability.

[7] This memo can be accessed via the municipal council website, here.

[8] For more information, see: https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/gaswinning-in-groningen/toekomstfonds-groningen

1. **Housing in depopulating areas**
   Stakeholders assess the need for modifications to the housing stock, e.g. major maintenance or renovations to make them energy-efficient. They also consider demand for new homes and where these should be built.
2. **Facilities in depopulating areas**
   Stakeholders consider the feasibility of concentrating or merging local facilities such as schools, libraries, childcare and healthcare services. They also look at the accessibility of current facilities and whether this needs improving.
3. **Maintaining economic activity and employment in depopulating areas**
   Stakeholders consider ways of maintaining – and, if possible, boosting – the local economy. This could be done by making agreements, for instance:
   a. with local schools, businesses and care institutions about how to fast-track school-leavers into employment;
   b. about the accessibility of business parks or shopping areas;
   c. about taking advantage of opportunities for cross-border partnerships with Germany and Belgium.

Figure 22: Explicating the three policy pillars for tackling population decline (retrieved from Tackling population decline | Population decline | Government.nl)

Though policies were formulated at national level, their implementation was explicitly transferred to lower-level governments: *"The provincial and municipal authorities hold primary responsibility for tackling the effects of population decline. To ensure that they do not work at cross-purposes, they must work with local and regional parties, such as housing associations, schools, care institutions, active members of the community and businesses."* (government website). Between 2009 and 2018, The National Association for Smaller Settlements (LVKK) was one of the round table partners at the Ministry of Internal affairs, and involved in developing localised and citizen-centred approaches for dealing with population change. This fits the national policy discourse promoting devolution and 'the participatory society' (coined in 2013), where citizens are held responsible for finding local solutions to improve liveability (see also Meijer & Ernste, 2019).

However, scholars have criticised how the central government has approached shrinking effects and problems. As Bettina Bock, has argued,

> *"Dutch policy in recent years has mainly focused on maintaining the liveability of shrinkage areas. The focus has been on the accessibility of facilities and the quality of the living environment. Both are important but also modest goals with little focus on development and dynamics" (Bock 2019, p.26).*

Furthermore, the policies assumed a trickledown effect of compensation funds, and relied strongly on the positive impact of regional cooperation. While municipalities within shrinking regions successfully developed new cooperation structures (like Regio Achterhoek, Parkstad Limburg) their impact is difficult to measure. The claimed successes are generally limited to building new societal networks and collective regional branding. Sharing the pain of regional downsizing (e.g., concentrating facilities in larger urban centres, or distributing which housing plants should be abandoned) however remained difficult topics to discuss (see Rutgers, 2022 for an elaborated analysis of regional cooperation as panacea for shrinkage).
The once envied label 'shrinkage', is now experienced as a pain in the neck, negatively impacting regional economic development. This label would not attract newcomers, or businesses to invest in these regions. Increasingly shrinking regions deny population decline, supported by stabilising population numbers, and

focus their policies on economic development. Looking back at the national action plan to tackle shrinkage, local policy- and decision-makers find it difficult to pinpoint positive contributions and rather focus on regional development, starting out from a growth mind-set:

> *The downside of using the word 'shrinkage', and explaining that your region shrinks, is that it becomes a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. It does not help, in changing the tide. Especially the local business community did not appreciate this approach.*
> *The last two years we abandoned the term shrinkage. We now call it the 'demographic issue'. There still is degreening, just as aging. However, due to immigration from the Randstad (metropolitan regions) to the Achterhoek population decline has been put on hold.*
>
> (mayor Doetinchem, interviewed in 2022)

> *'Most regions find 'shrinkage' too negative as a (policy) label; we are now working on renewed policies that better address the issues these regions are dealing with. Labelling 'Shrinkage' also implies that people are no longer attracted to move to these regions; while it are also generally beautiful areas to live in. We are struggling with finding the right terms."*
>
> (policy-makers 'team demographic change' Ministry Internal Affairs, interviewed in 2022)

New policy horizons

In 2018 the 'Action plan for demographic decline' was updated for the last time. This policy update already indicated a new policy direction, the need to accept and adapt to shrinkage has been replaced by the motto 'from shrinkage to strength' (Bock, 2018).
Since the pandemic the population decline has stabilised in peripheral regions, and the urgency to tackle shrinkage as a specific policy issue at national level dissolved. Increasingly, the government wants to move away from a purely facilitating role (legislative and financial). Instead: The government is attempting to move towards being a collaboration partner of the region. This role has changed considerably over the past years, according to interviewed policy-makers from the Ministry of Internal Affairs:

> *"In past, every region had local offices with policy-makers from ministry as well. Now this has been downscaled and centralised: with three people from the Ministry we take care of all regional affairs.*
> *Now, we do operate with 'Region Deals': contracts in which we make agreements between national and regional partners regarding stimulating economic development and investments in social infrastructures. This way of cooperating with regions from bottom-up. We hope to generate more deals in the coming years: this is the new way of collaborating."*
>
> (policy-makers ministry internal affairs)

In 2022, the Action Plan for Demographic Decline is fully replaced by 'Regio Deals' (Region Deals). Though not explicitly targeted at 'shrinking' regions, the minister of internal affairs recently announced a special focus on peripheral regions (border regions). Besides a more equalised and bottom-up set up, these Region Deals are aimed at stimulating Inclusive Prosperity (Brede Welvaart) - allowing all groups in society to benefit from economic growth, rather than looking at income development, the sum of Quality of Life or generic liveability as indicators for well-being. For peripheral regions the policy consists of four pillars: 1) an area-based approach, 2) tailored support from the national government, 3) focus on international (border) cooperation, and 4) active support through knowledge development and innovation (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2022), see Figure 21).

1. **Area-based commitment for border regions.**
   Following this area-based track, extra attention is given to border regions where wellbeing and liveability are most pressured, and where most opportunities can be found for cross-border cooperation.
2. **Tailored National Policies and strengthening integrated support from the national government.**
   During the preparation of national policies, the national government looks at its performance in practice and specific regions. Specific attention is given to constraints that arise from policy differences between neighbouring states - the so-called border effects.
3. **Further development and cooperation.**
   During the previous governing period commitments have been made with Lower Saxony, North Rhine Westphalia, Flanders and Wallonia. It is not time to focus on continuation of cross-border cooperation with Germany and Belgium. This concerns important topics, such as safety, employment, and cross-border mobility.
4. **Active support with knowledge and innovation.**
   Increasingly knowledge and information is disclosed at a regional level, by regional assessment agencies (like the Frisian Institute for Social Research) and through the regional monitor for inclusive prosperity, developed by CBS. This supports making the right choices and monitoring its results.

Figure 23: explicating the four pillars for stimulating development and generic prosperity at border regions (translated from Kabinet zet in op sterke regio's aan de grens | Nieuwsbericht | Rijksoverheid.nl)

The development and implementation of Region Deals is monitored by the Environmental Assessment Agency (in Dutch PBL). So far, the following regions affected by demographic decline and change have setup Region Deals:

Table 9 Established Region Deals (retrieved from Home | Elke regio telt).

Province:	**Regio Deal**
Groningen	- North Groningen - Eastern Groningen
Friesland	- North-East Friesland/Holwerd at Sea
Gelderland	- Achterhoek
Limburg	- North-Limburg - Park City Limburg
Zeeland	- Zeeland-Flanders

Though recently introduced, also Region Deals are critically assessed as well. On the one hand, this policy breaks the trend of neo-liberal, efficiency oriented economic policies and prioritises local knowledge and regionally tailored solutions. On the other hand, Academics and local stakeholders criticise the 'quid pro

quo' approach, the inconsistency of strategies and formulated outcomes (inclusive prosperity - Brede Welvaart - is already a notoriously vague policy concept) and question the effectiveness of these policies for the aspired distributed spatial justice (Van Vulpen, 2022).

A third national policy instrument, aimed at regional revitalisation, are the National Programmes - national investments targeted at specific disadvantaged regions (see table 9, for an overview revitalisation policy types). To stimulate socio-economic development, several shrinking regions have a national programme, often because of additional challenges. National Programme Groningen is developed to enable sustainable future development, but also because of region specific challenges as earthquakes and a low socio-economic status In total 1.15 billion euros are invested in projects in Groningen (national programme Groningen, 2019). Also, Heerlen-Noord (Park City Limburg) has such a National Programme, as a former mining area, challenged by high unemployment and high poverty levels.

While in Groningen the programme focuses on environmentally and socially sustainable transitions - like renewable energy, Heerlen-Noord forefronts social sustainable development and explicitly mentions stimulating bottom-up initiatives to enhance social capital (Alliantie van het Nationaal Programma Heerlen-Noord, 2022). Zeeland also received national investments (650 billion euros), not as part of a national programme, but to compensate for the loss of a planned naval base (and subsequent loss of employment, increased consumption and population growth). With this investment the train connection with the Randstad will be intensified, but also supra-regional services (like a specialised court, a knowledge centre and training centre for general practitioners) are allocated to the region.

Table 10 Types of policies for revitalisation of shrinking areas

Governmental level	**Type of policy**
EU	- LEADER
National	- Actieplan bevokingsdaling - Region Deals (since 2020, in cooperation with local governments) - National Programme (focused policy programmes for specific regions - Groningen, Heerlen-Noord, Zeeland
Provincial	- Provincial programmes - Sector-oriented policies (housing, economy, liveability, etc.)
Region (informal institutional layer)	- Regional Cooperation initiatives (e.g., Werkplein Ability Hogeland) - Regional strategies (e.g., Visie Achterhoek 2030)
Municipal	- Strategic Development Plans (omgevingsvisie) - Local Development Programmes (sector-oriented)

Regional revitalisation programmes

Forced by national policies, and motivated to stimulate regional development (also in absence of concrete policy measures) provincial governments have developed their own revitalisation programmes. These

policies differ in their problem definition - related to the regional context and over time, development strategies and cooperation structures (see Beunen, Meijer & De Vries 2020). A recurring theme however is the growing 'regional gap': increasingly peripheral regions argue investments are not equally distributed among all parts of the Netherlands, and that they are lagging behind.

The province of Groningen e.g., explicitly mentions shrinkage as a national problem augmented by a devolution of welfare policy to local and regional level, without sufficient funds. Moreover, they position themselves as a 'living lab' for anticipating challenges related to demographic change and finding solutions for other societal challenges (Province Groningen, 2015). De Achterhoek region conversely coins 'smart governance' and regional cooperation as their development strategy. Through projects focused on regional branding and smart innovation, they ambition a vital economy and maintaining a high living standard (8RHK 2018).

In addition to overarching regional policies, in all regions (dozens of) sectoral policies have been formulated for housing (rightsizing and intra-municipal coordination), employment and economy, liveability (stimulating bottom-up and citizen initiatives), care facilities (declining workforce, ageing population and centralisation of functions) and cross-border cooperation. Today we can witness a replacement of provincial and sector specific policies by the earlier mentioned Region Deals.

Welcoming strategies in regional revitalisation programs

While demographic shrinkage is no longer framed as the main regional problem, ageing and especially the loss of pupil number are now recognized as the main hazards for regional (economic) development. Declining pupil numbers affects the future workforce, and economic development opportunities. Already small and medium-sized businesses in peripheral regions like De Achterhoek, Parkstad Limburg and Groningen experience problems in finding skilled employees. At the moment we can see that local and regional policies focus at attracting workforce. On the one hand, this done through enabling those with a 'distance to the labour market' to acquire the right skills (for the manufacturing industries, tourism, or care). This explicitly includes asylum-seekers and labour migrants.

On the other hand, municipal and provincial governments highlight and aim to further develop the quality of living environment: stressing the regional attractiveness, and high standards of liveability: green surroundings, strong social cohesion and affordable housing. Municipality Het Hogeland e.g., mentioned togetherness, and being a highly liveable region as local strengths:

> *"With the local programme 'Kop op 't Hogeland', Het Hogeland focuses on liveability and opportunities for the future. Together with its inhabitants, the municipality is putting its heads together to work on a liveable region. With the local programme, Het Hogeland stimulates living, working and recreation in the municipality."* Local Programme municipality Het Hogeland

Also, within the Region Deal Zeeland Flanders the local attractiveness and liveability are mentioned as their main assets:

> *"Zeeland Flanders is facing population decline, de-greening and ageing, among other things. Therefore, the social structure and cohesion, liveability and quality of the living environment in Zeeland Flanders require additional strengthening. The Zeeland Flanders Region Deal 'Zeeuwen zelf aan zet' therefore focuses on strengthening the social dimension of this part of Zeeland, by involving residents in the issues surrounding climate and energy transition,*

health and care facilities, quality of the living and living environment and agricultural transition."
Region Deal Zeeland Flanders, initiative Zeeuwen zelf aan Zet

WP 4 Discourses and representations

The Netherlands is not a recent destination country and discourses and policies have therefore shaped the settlement of diverse groups of migrants for decades. Scholars have analysed how migration discourses have developed historically. This research points towards various discursive shifts, such as the end of the multiculturalist paradigm in the early 2000s and the emergence of civic integration policies (Bonjour & Duyvendak 2018). It also shows how local actors have recast national integration discourses in the Netherlands (Hoekstra 2015). The Dutch context is characterised by several competing discourses on migration, rather than one dominant discourse (Duyvendak & Scholten 2011). This discussion, therefore, provides a succinct overview of the main trends in the classification of migrants, the framing of migration and shrinking regions, before zooming in on the framing of migration and welcoming spaces in shrinking regions.

Discourses about migrants and migration
In the Netherlands, there have been competing discourses and policy frames for different groups of migrants (such as refugees) and framing trends differ between these categories of migrants. The categorisation of migrants by Dutch authorities and research institutes is shaped by broader political discourses, but also produces discursive representations. In 2017, the *Dutch Scientific Research Council* (WRR) investigated classification practices and recommended a 'multiple migration idiom' that is more appropriate to present migration diversity' (Bovens et al., 2016). This meant that commonly used terms such as 'allochtone' and 'autochtone' were discarded by state authorities and research organisations. In 2021, the WRR also recommended to only use the western and non-western (binary) classification if there are no alternatives, arguing this categorisation has a ranking effect, is not backed by scientific evidence and is not meaningful given the huge diversity of countries of origin. Some of the suggested alternative classifications are labour migrants, family migrants or asylum migrants.

This discussion about proper migration classification and idioms is part of broader migration debates in the Netherlands. Research shows historically discourses on migration issues have focused on problems, such as the problems migrants are seen to create for host communities, or the problems immigrants have (see Schrover & Schinkel 2012). While it is certainly true that migration is often presented as a 'burden' rather than a benefit, upon closer inspection there are also alternative framings.

Framing of Forced Migration
Dutch scholars have devoted considerable attention to the framing of refugee reception and the opening of asylum seeker centres, rather than the framing of refugees (see D'Haenens & De Lange 2001; van Gorp 2006; Miellet 2022). Research into the framing of refugee reception shows, for instance, that local political officials also often draw on neutral frames, emphasising shared administrative or human rights duties rather than burdens or benefits of refugee reception for the locality (see Miellet 2022). That said, crisis frames remain common, even years after the long summer of migration. This is in part due to long-standing funding and capacity problems of the centralised reception authority (COA) and immigration and naturalisation service (IND). Refugee reception is often represented as a collective administrative burden, rather than a collective responsibility by local and national politicians. This emphasis on burden rather than responsibility sharing is indicative of a broader restrictive turn that has shaped national asylum and immigration policies

in recent years. This is also reflected in public discourses on migration through terms such as 'asylum stop', 'asylum tsunami' and 'safe third country persons'.

Scholarly investigations of media attention and policy framing of forced migration points to the prevalence of crisis and burden frames, but also highlights other dominant frames. In their study Dekker and Scholten (2015) identified four dominant frames: a human-interest frame, a threat frame, a governance frame and an economic frame. This study suggested that economic frames rarely featured in news media. Discussions of economic frames, however, tend to focus on the perceived and imagined costs of immigration and not on the possible (economic) benefits of asylum migration or refugee reception for local communities. Additionally, positive frames often gravitate around humanitarian sentiments and moral arguments. Another study (Konings & Notten, 2021) found that where refugees are presented in a positive light this was often in combination with frames that victimise refugees, emphasizing their plight rather than their potential for local communities.[9]

In some places local actors have pushed back against negative 'threat' frames, but in doing so often draw on moral or human rights frames, rather than emphasising benefits of refugee reception for host localities (see Miellet 2022). In this process of 'reframing migration debates' mayors play an important role. Dutch mayors are not democratically elected, but appointed and this also has implications for partisan politics, as Dutch mayors are expected to adopt neutral positions. In relation to the framing of migration, mayors have sought to reassure local residents and have pushed for frames that emphasize collective action and shared responsibilities. The formats differ, some mayors are active on social media (e.g., Twitter), others have written columns or public letters of support on particular occasions, such as the opening of new refugee shelters. At the same time, they draw attention to and 'champion' local welcoming initiatives. Refugee rights and welfare organisations also play an important role in shaping local discourses. In some localities, they have also sought to influence public opinion by collecting first-hand accounts of refugee newcomers in the municipality (see figure X).

Figure 24: Example of local initiatives to reframe migration debates, initiative of Vluchtelingenwerk Fryske Marren[10] and MJD Hogeland.[11]

[9] On the topic of victimization as opposed to positive representation, see KhosraviNik (2010) p.19.
[10] https://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/sites/default/files/2022-02/Nieuwe%20Buren.pdf
[11] https://www.mjd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Boekje_Spreekuur_Statushouders_Het_Hogeland_def.pdf

Framing of Labour Migration

An interesting development with regard to public and political debates on labour migrants is that the term 'international employees' is gaining traction. Local and regional authorities, firms and research institutes have adopted this term to counter the stigmatisation of labour migrants and to bridge the discursive divide between expats and labour migrants (Jansen Lorkeers & Wits 2022). This trend comes in response to increasing concerns about the precarious position of labour migrants, who are often stigmatised in news media through terms such as 'polenhotel' (hotel for polish labour migrants), 'arbeidsmigrantenproblematiek' (labour migrant problematique) and through references to 'liveability and social cohesion problems'.

> *"Is a Polish man who has lived in the Netherlands for years and settled here permanently still a migrant worker? And do you call someone a labour migrant if they have been unemployed for a long time? In addition, German and Belgian migrants living in the Netherlands for work are often not considered 'labour migrants', as are Europeans who have a skilled job with a good income. In the media and popular debates, the word 'labour migrant' seems primarily used as a designation for Southern, Central and Eastern Europeans doing temporary and mostly unskilled work. There is a negative connotation attached to the word. That is why several organisations choose not to speak of 'migrant workers' but 'international workers'."* National government annual report on labour migration (2021, 7).

In 2020, the national Coordination Centre against Human Trafficking (COMENSHA) called for national and regional campaigns to counter disinformation and to improve public perceptions of labour migration (COMENSHA, 2020). In 2021, several public information and awareness campaigns were initiated such as the campaigns 'Labour Migration Works' and Share My Voice. Some regional initiatives, such as the steering committee 'international employees Limburg', seek to build popular support for international employees by showcasing 'good examples' (Stuurgroep Internationale Werknemers, 2020, p. 14).

Figure 25: Source: Arbeidsmigratie Werkt | Flyer for the campaign 'Labour Migration Works'

Local government actors and particularly mayors have sought to reframe local and national debates, as illustrated by the quote below. Civil society and municipal actors are not the only ones that actively seek to shape public perceptions of migration in shrinking regions. In Hulst in Zeeland Flanders, care provider

Tragel initiated a welcoming initiative that focuses on attracting international care professionals. At the same time, Tragel is putting this project in its own spotlight in the organisation's magazine and by promoting it across the region in network events.

> *"We should not see international employees as a financial burden but as valuable employees who deserve to be treated well. That starts with being a good employer"*
> Mayor of Hollandse Kroon

Discourses on and framing of shrinking regions

Dutch politicians and policymakers tend to shy away from the term 'shrinking region' and opt for positive frames, such as 'creative rural areas'. Public and policy debates do highlight the adverse effects of demographic developments associated with shrinkage, such as the degradation of public spaces, vacant properties, social segregation because of the selective out migration of highly-skilled young residents and pressures on local services as a result of population ageing. However, even when these adverse effects are explicitly recognised, many local and regional actors draw on positive frames. Research also suggests that many residents in shrinking localities consider 'shrinking' a wholly negative classification and therefore prefer a positive emphasis on 'liveability' (Bock et al. 2018). Other examples of such alternative framings are strengthening resilience or liveability (versterken veerkracht of leefbaarheid). As Ubels, Bock and Haartsen note, in the Dutch context this term has been used to refer to 'the individual satisfaction with the social and physical living environment and the extent to which the environment responds to demands of collective nature, such as the level of facilities and services, the public space, meeting opportunities and social care' (2020, p. 731, see also Gieling and Haartsen 2017).

Figure 26: Tragel Magazine on recruiting international care professionals, 2022 available on Tragel website

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Discourses on and framing of welcome initiatives and migration in shrinking regions

Studies on the framing of refugee arrivals in rural localities and small towns suggests local government officials are sometimes reluctant to frame refugee arrivals as a benefit to local communities (Miellet, 2022). Instead, mayors tend to emphasize local involvement in asylum governance as a matter of collective responsibility or a moral duty (see also quote). In recent years, some mayors have drawn connections to popular support for refugee reception and cuts in general welfare and infrastructure. This is illustrated by the quote below, from a press interview with the mayor of the municipality Het Hogeland:

> *"Refugee reception is everyone's responsibility. From my fellow politicians, I expect more solidarity. I am happy with the local support for the reception of refugees. But in conversations I notice that there is less understanding for budget cuts in things like village halls and maintenance. We have too little money for core tasks and therefore make an urgent appeal to the state. Give us the money required for the tasks we need to perform."*
>
> Mayor of the municipality Het Hogeland

When it comes to welcoming initiatives, local political officials often praise and draw attention to local initiatives, as illustrated by the following quote:

> *These past months, there has been a huge appeal to the community. With the help of 100 volunteers, we have shown what 'Gastvrij Geleen' (Hospitable Geleen) means. Now we are giving Glanerbrook back to the athletes and sports clubs. I am proud of how everyone has worked so hard to make it possible for people who are fleeing to still be safely accommodated here."*[12]
>
> Mayor of Sittard-Geleen

Welcoming initiatives in marginalised regions have also been put in the spotlight by regional actors. In Zeeland, one welcoming initiative was nominated for the regional Zeeland labour market innovation award of the Province of Zeeland.

Coalition Agreements - A snapshot of local policy agendas and frames

In the Netherlands, coalition agreements of local governments offer a glimpse of local policy agendas and political discourses. After municipal council elections, the 'winners' of municipal council elections work towards forming a coalition. This negotiation of an executive coalition agreement is a key venue for local

[12] https://www.sittard-geleen.nl/actueel/Home/Nieuwsoverzicht/Glanerbrook_sluit_voorlopig_als_locatie_voor_asiel_en_vluchtelingenopvang

policy agenda setting and coalition agreements shed light on policy agendas and policy frames (Breeman, Scholten & Timmermans, 2015). Dutch scholars that analysed these coalition agreements have argued that in some cases these local policy agendas point towards specifically 'local politics of attention' (Breeman, Scholten & Timmermans, 2015). A brief glance at some of the coalition agreements for the municipalities included in this study shows that in most cases migration topics do not feature prominently. One exception to this general trend is the municipality of Middelburg which states its human rights commitment and approach to asylum governance and refugee integration.

> *"We will continue to receive asylum seekers in the coming years. To this end, we will continue to plan for a long-term, sustainable reception centre […] Recognised refugees must be integrated as soon as possible and helped into work as soon as possible via learning-work trajectories in health care and technology, combining work and language. In our housing policy we pay attention to living space for workers. This way, we contribute to the economy in the current tight labour market"* municipality of Middelburg, coalition agreement 2022 (p.x)

> *"We want to dedicate specific attention to recognised refugees, so we can help them find work in sectors with labour market shortages"* municipality Berkelland, coalition agreement (2022, p.33

In most cases, we can find an occasional reference to migration or migrants. In Sittard-Geleen the only reference to migration is the municipal ambition to attract firms and employees by using branding and marketing to promote Sittard-Geleen (2022, p.6).[13]
In Berkelland, the agreement states the executive board wants 'adequate housing for labour migrants and seasonal workers from other EU-member states' (p.12) as well as a municipal commitment to enforce the policy framework.' Its coalition agreement also states the municipality's commitment to an inclusive housing policy and that the municipality acknowledges its responsibility in the field of civic integration (of recognised refugees) and refugee reception. That refugee reception is explicitly mentioned is interesting. Unlike the integration of recognised refugees which falls under the municipal mandate, asylum governance was entirely centrally organised in the Netherlands until the recent arrival of refugees from Ukraine. Since March 2022 municipalities have been 'in the lead' to organise shelters and accommodation for refugees from Ukraine, whereas the organisation of accommodation for asylum seekers remains a task for the centralised reception authority (COA).

Figure 27 Coalition Agreements Sittard-Geleen and Het Hogeland

[13] https://www.sittard-geleen.nl/Bestuur/College/Coalitieakkoord_en_uitvoeringsprogramma/Coalitieakkoord_Sittard_Geleen_2022_2026

Beyond forced migrants and labour migrants, coalition agreements occasionally refer to other 'guests', namely tourists. In Hulst and Nederweert, for instance, the coalition agreements do not devote attention to refugees and labour migrants. In both documents, however, there is considerable attention for other forms of mobility, namely tourism.

When it comes to the causes and effects of shrinking, there is also considerable variation between the coalition agreement documents. Some refer indirectly to challenges associated with shrinking, such as population decline and the possible effects on local and regional schools. In the coalition agreement of Hulst, we can find an explicit commitment to maintain the regional educational infrastructure. Schools, the document states, are of fundamental importance to the quality of life (leefbaarheid). The municipal executive, therefore, not only lists local plans, but also states its commitment to lobby for greater support from the central government. In Nederweert, the municipality also states a commitment to develop a long-term strategy to primary education infrastructure in every 'kern' (core village) considering 'demographic developments'.

The visualisation project in Bedum, municipality Het Hogeland

In the summer of 2022, two members of the Dutch research team organised a photography workshop as part of a broader Welcoming Spaces visualisation project. The workshop took place over the course of two days. It was jointly organised with one of the welcoming initiatives incorporated into this study; *Colourful Het Hogeland* and organised in a community space of the local library in Bedum. The idea behind the photography workshop was to enable co-creation of narratives and visual imaginaries of the locality from different perspectives. To this purpose, workshop participants were also invited to comment on their pictures and to think of accompanying texts, such as short poems, all of which are included in an exhibition which will be opened in January 2023 in the Netherlands. The opening of this exhibition will be a public event in which residents, volunteers and various local and municipal actors will participate. As such the travelling exhibition and event are a 'visual and discursive intervention' and effort to reframe migration debates in this particular context. At the same time, many of the pictures, captions and short texts were also included in the *Digital Book, Connections*. This Welcoming Spaces Digital Book includes photographs, stories and maps from participants in five European localities in Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and The Netherlands.

WP 5 Migrant-Citizen engagements

Many welcoming initiatives analysed in this report are citizen initiatives that were established and are coordinated by local residents. Some community initiatives focus on supporting migrant newcomers and indirectly on strengthening social well-being. Several initially focused on supporting (specific) groups of migrants, most often refugees, but later broadened the scope to include other migrant newcomers and/or other residents (such as the initiative in Vogelwaarde). While we use the term 'citizen-driven', community-based initiatives may be more accurate in this context, as not all active residents have Dutch citizenship.

On the basis of our analysis, we observe a broad spectrum of community-based initiatives driven by residents; not only in the field of intercultural exchange and participation. There are also community-based initiatives in the field of the green transition, such as residents energy collectives and sustainable housing communities. Some initiatives that we identified in the first phase of the research are not located in shrinking regions and therefore fall outside the scope of this report. That said, for WP5 we have conducted interviews

with several of these welcoming initiatives, such as with the coordinator of an EcoVillage. We believe these initiatives are relevant to broader questions about revitalisation of shrinking regions for two reasons. First of all, because they focus on how local sustainability initiatives can contribute to building arrival infrastructures for migrants, while simultaneously strengthening public services and community life in small rural municipalities. Secondly,

On the basis of our research, we observed that some welcoming initiatives are being driven by people with a migrant background, however their involvement is often not explicitly mentioned or 'showcased'. A exception to this overall trend is the initiative, Partisan Medical Mercenaries. In contrast, the WOOW project's training trajectory for recognised refugees is coordinated by a local entrepreneur and consultant with a migrant background and longstanding experience with developing inclusionary measures. This expertise by experience is not explicitly stated in the project communication, which could also indicate a broader commitment to and normalisation of diversity. Another such example is Colourful Hogeland, which is currently coordinated by several residents with a migrant background. In this case, the coordinator's own migratory experiences has sensitised him to the importance of intercultural communication. In 2022, the initiative has for instance sought to support grassroots migrant organisations in the region self-organise, such as an Eritrean initiative in the municipality.

Many of the welcoming initiatives included in this study are multi-stake holder initiatives in which the local government plays an important role, alongside various third sector organisations. Some examples are the SIREE project in Middelburg, Vakland Hogeland and Newcomers in Care in the Achterhoek. Rather than the local government, local *governance* partnerships often coordinate such welcoming initiatives. 'Newcomers in Care' in the Achterhoek region, is for instance supported by the regional employer service point, a governance partnership between Achterhoek municipalities, the Dutch provider of employee insurance schemes (UWV) and local and regional businesses. At the same time, we saw that the implementation of these projects often relies on local volunteers and that in some cases these projects were initiated by local residents that are also professionally involved in local revitalisation efforts.

Since the increased number of refugee arrivals in 2015, there has been an increasing focus on flexible housing and mixed housing arrangements where refugees live with other groups, such as students. Often these projects are an initiative of municipalities and housing corporations. In some places in the Netherlands, housing groups and housing cooperatives have also initiated such projects. There is the example of the EcoVillage in Boekel (municipality of Meijerijstad) where a citizen-community collective have offered two housing units to the municipality and COA for status holders. In another region, in the village of Nederasselt, there are also plans for an "Eco-neighborhood that also offers housing solutions for recognised refugees. In 2022, after the arrival of forcibly displaced persons from Ukraine, local village councils in various rural regions organised emergency shelters. It is too early to tell how local, regional and national authorities will respond to these local initiatives in the long-run and to assess to what extent citizens, migrants and civil society organisations can actively take part in organising accommodations for asylum seekers and other forced migrants.

5. Conclusion

The *Welcoming Spaces* programme investigates how the emergence of welcoming spaces is conditioned by marginalised regions' economic viability, social wellbeing and political stability and how welcoming spaces, may contribute to these three factors. This country report contextualised Dutch (shrinking) regions and welcoming initiatives within them. The report presented data on the basis of empirical research and desk research conducted between 2020 and 2022 on 18 welcoming initiatives in 9 municipalities. The selection of these municipalities was not guided by an ambition to obtain a representative sample of Dutch shrinking localities, but explores how welcoming initiatives are shaped by and may impact on economic viability, social wellbeing and political stability in different shrinking regions. In other words, the rationale was to achieve variation and to explore welcoming initiatives in various local and regional settings.

In these 9 municipalities we identified 18 welcoming initiatives. In terms of a typology of welcoming initiatives, we presented an overview of the main actors involved and the thematic focus of the welcoming initiatives. Welcoming initiatives were grouped into three clusters: social inclusion and intercultural exchange (table 6), innovative welfare and work in care (table 7) and lastly the green/energy transition (table 8). For each of these clusters, we described organisational aspects, objectives and the main actors involved in welcoming initiatives. The analysis was divided in three parts.

Welcoming initiatives and economic viability

The first part focused on *economic viability*. Two things stand out with regard to how welcoming initiatives may be shaped by and contribute to economic viability. First of all, this report highlighted how training and transition trajectories have been developed by multi-stakeholder initiatives in shrinking regions that enable newcomers' labour market inclusion and emplacement. These training and transition trajectories are not unique to shrinking regions. However, in these selected shrinking regions and localities, these training trajectories reflect regional opportunities and labour market dynamics. In the studied municipalities they tend to focus on the care sector and the energy sector, including installation and green technologies. As such these initiatives address an important challenge that several Dutch shrinking regions face; namely mismatches between educational infrastructure, skill supply and skill demand in regional labour markets.

A second key finding is that most welcoming initiatives focusing on economic viability are multi-stakeholder initiatives. This report included examples of welcoming initiatives focusing on economic viability that were initiated by coalitions of local stakeholders (such as Vakland Hogeland), regional partnerships (such as the WOOW project) as well as interregional partnerships (such as the IDZ/UDZ project).

Welcoming initiatives and social stability

In contrast, most welcoming initiatives focusing on social wellbeing that we identified in our study are citizen initiatives or civil society initiatives. The primary focus of these welcoming initiatives is to help newcomers navigate local and regional participation thresholds and barriers. We emphasize 'navigate', because for local actors it is often hard to resolve or remove such participation barriers altogether. Welcoming initiatives in regions plagued by poor access to public transport, for instance, organised cycling lessons for newcomers or community transport options. These activities helped newcomers navigate some participation barriers, but did little to effectuate structural changes.

Not all barriers to participation are linked to regional and local factors, some relate to personal circumstances of welcoming initiatives' participants. Several coordinators of citizen-led initiatives explained the timing and location of events impacted on possibilities for participation. Organising activities during

evening hours means those who at work or in school during the daytime can attend. However, this can pose challenges for families with young children and shape gender dynamics in activities organised. Local actors involved in welcoming initiatives, therefore, stressed events and activities often address local and regional participation barriers, but also highlighted various other dilemmas.

Welcoming initiatives that focus on social inclusion, intercultural exchange and social wellbeing are often coordinated by volunteers. This means there is a fragility to many initiatives as a result of dependence on volunteers and due to a lack of structural funding. Interviewees also pointed to conflicts on ownership related to founders and users. Last but not least, we observed that welcoming initiatives focusing on social inclusion and wellbeing, such as language cafés, were hardly ever 'scaled out' or 'scaled up'. This stands in contrasts with welcoming initiatives focusing on economic viability, especially those driven by multiple stakeholders.

Political stability and political climate

The analysis also shed light on how welcoming initiatives in Dutch shrinking regions relate to political stability and political climate. In this regard, there are also three key findings to highlight. First of all, our analysis points towards different degrees of political trust in Dutch shrinking regions. Secondly, in all 9 municipalities we denoted the influence of right wing populist parties, albeit to varying degrees, that entered municipal politics. In the municipal councils, elected right wing populist parties have a larger share of votes than the national average. Their presence in municipal politics shapes local political debates on migration. It is also important to note that these municipalities, although located in peripheralised regions, are 'no islands' but connected to broader political debates, as we illustrated in our discussion of political mobilisations.

The third main thing that we observed relates to political participation. In this respect, we found that newcomers' participation in the first phases of the policy cycle is limited. There are very few opportunities for participation in political agenda setting or political decision-making. The municipal councils in these municipalities generally have no or few elected officials representing minority or newcomer groups. In some municipalities we observed newcomers were involved as 'experts by experience' (ervaringsdeskundigen) advising on the implementation of specific policies, such as civic integration programmes.

Reflections on the research question

Having outlined the main findings for these three factors, we conclude with a reflection on this report's two-stepped overarching research question. First of all, we observed that most welcoming initiatives emerged in response to challenges related to either economic viability or social wellbeing. Within our study, a minority of initiatives addressed political participation. When welcoming initiatives aimed towards enabling political participation, they tended to focus on building social support for migration by organising everyday encounters between refugee residents and other residents. Or, they involved providing information about local political institutions, such as the municipality and municipal council elections.

In terms of welcoming initiatives' contributions to economic viability, social wellbeing and political stability, we found it striking that many citizen and civil society initiatives seemed to focus on mitigating rather than resolving barriers to emplacement. Another thing that stood out, is that some welcoming initiatives address several aspects simultaneously, such as economic viability and social wellbeing, *by design*. The projects, Into Care to be Carefree (IDZ/UDZ) and WOOW in Limburg, for instance, provide opportunities for labour market inclusion, but also positively impact on social inclusion.

This report built upon the earlier context analysis and Quick Scan and serves as a steppingstone for the next research stage. For this reason, it also highlights the relevance of the findings for each of the work packages, in relation to their thematic focus (geopolitical positionality, governance structures, discourse and representations and migrant-citizen engagements). For instance, in the discussion on discourse and representations (WP4), we opted for a broad perspective on changing Dutch political discourses, policy frames as well as media representations. Similarly, in our discussion of migrant-citizen engagements (WP5) we noted that there are a number of interesting citizen and civil society initiatives that are located in areas that are not yet classified as shrinking regions, but which will be affected by shrinking and related demographic developments. In this case, we argued that it is important to also adopt a forward-looking perspective, in addition to tracing more long-term developments.

Context matters

Last but not least, we would like to stress that during the research and writing up of this analysis, there were many important changes to the way in which national, regional and local authorities approach migration, shrinkage and revitalisation. During this period, we observed different legal reforms (such as a reform of the Dutch Integration Act), changing media and political discourses on migration and lastly, the development of new national policies on regional revitalisation and shrinking regions. All these developments emerged during the (aftermath of the) Covid-19 pandemic. While we realise this country report is a snapshot of the current situation, we therefore sought to highlight potential implications of these emerging developments, such as the shift from mitigating shrinking to the emergence of region deals. It is clear that context matters and that to contextualise our inquiry of welcoming initiatives' linkages to revitalisation efforts in marginalised Dutch regions, we need to be attentive to contextual factors as well as ongoing regional and translocal dynamics.

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