DOCUMENTATION

WELCOMING SPACES CONFERENCE
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'WELCOMING EUROPE'? UNDERSTANDING MIGRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL AGEING, DEPOPULATION AND RURAL-URBAN TRANSFORMATION

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*(*all photos taken by J. Tesorio, unless otherwise indicated)*

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BACKGROUND OF THE CONFERENCE

Current discussions about the link between migration, ageing, and depopulation often lead to polarised debates. Is migration the solution? Can migrants contribute to filling gaps and revitalising shrinking areas? These questions reveal multiple paradoxes and dilemmas. Drawing from the outcomes of our H2020 Welcoming Spaces program (2019-2024) and various Utrecht University research initiatives, the conference aimed at broadening the debate. The organisers' goal was to unravel the connections between ageing, shrinkage, and migration, ultimately proposing concrete suggestions for achieving "spatial justice" and ensuring that no one is left behind.

OPENING

ANNELIES ZOOMERS

Prof. Dr. Annelies Zoomers, professor of International Development Studies at Utrecht University and Principal Investigator of the H2020 Welcoming Spaces project opened the conference on a positive note, by going back to the core of how the project started four years ago. She stressed the importance of looking at places where welcoming initiatives are working and planting roots for better migration policies.

Prof. Dr. Annelies Zoomers gives her opening address.

“Starting from the idea that on the one hand we are spending billions of dollars on keeping migrants out. That was our point of departure, we were all critical about that. If you think about the context and procedures, people working in that industry, etc., you never hear critical remarks about the effectiveness of spending money like that… But we also realised that while on the one hand we spent billions on that issue, at the same time within Europe you have many areas that are in need of investment and people, and by then it was not yet an important policy field - shrinking areas - and it's not only in Spain or Italy or Poland, it's also in the Netherlands and Germany.”

Prof. Zoomers went on to explain how the idea of the Welcoming Spaces project was born – to focus on shrinking areas where migrants are also living. The project asked, according to Prof. Zoomers, “whether it would be possible to reframe the migration debate in such a way that we could show also to the non-willing people that indeed migrants play a very important role.” “And we also during that process became critical of ourselves, because it is a very instrumentalistic approach of course, but I think the more neutral version of our original point of departure is we had an interest to see how through our research we could find ways forward in making Europe a more welcoming place, which is not the case at this moment. Stressing the need to have better opportunities for all, people who were left behind in those places, but also migrants who are increasingly sent to those places, and that is the core of today, listening to the results of our program, and experience of others”.

Prof. Zoomers stressed that through the project, we can learn from all the experiences and translate that into an approach that can contribute, eventually, to making Europe welcoming again.

She also talked about the dramatic changes within the span of the project. Shortly after the launch of Welcoming Spaces, COVID forced everyone on a lockdown, which meant fieldworks were suspended. “But the interesting thing is also that it created dynamics in our field of study because it had implications on how we look at rural areas. It had implications also for migrants. So, it came with dynamics that made our topic even more urgent and relevant.”

And with less than two years to conclude the project, Russia attacked Ukraine, which also changed the dynamics of migration and looking at the research. She also pointed out the rise of right-wing parties in Europe. “Then, of course, we experienced, after the refugee flow from Syria and the war with Ukraine and the increasing numbers of Ukrainian refugees moving into all kinds of places within different countries, also made us aware of how unexpected things can happen, not only the war, but also, for example, the role of Poland, which in our original design was still an example of a country with an anti-migration agenda. Suddenly it was different, so that also made us aware that sometimes the unexpected can happen. And of course, nowadays we are in a new political reality with the rise of the right wing, etc.”

Despite all these, the Principal Investigator believed that the project found "very hopeful things", irrespective of what is happening in the world. "We found that at the level of local communities, also municipalities, there is a lot of positive energy, and there are also many examples of bypassed places that do not depend so much on governments… She posed the challenge to the participants to learn from the examples and how to mobilise that kind of energy and to slowly target other actors. At the end, to see whether indeed Europe can be made in a more welcoming place, again.

AJAY BAILEY

Prof. Dr. Ajay Bailey (Head of Department SGPL, Utrecht University) filled his short welcome with optimism, saying that the H2020 project's inter-disciplinariness is the core of what Utrecht University believes in. For him, the project has brought in many ideas and cited its contribution in changing the often-assumed idea that development studies were about African or Asia. "The project showed that different expertise and skills from different sciences and other groups can work together. It also showed the importance of focusing on shrinking regions, not necessarily as problems, but as opportunities as well."

Prof. Dr. Ajay Bailey talks about the contribution of the Welcoming Spaces project to international development studies.

Even if the Welcoming Spaces project has already ended, Prof. Dr. Bailey hoped that the university and the groups involved can continue the discussions given the current

political climate that pushes the society into very narrow-minded approaches into what migration should and should not do or how it should be managed or not managed. “In that sense, I think these are hopeful moments where we have to fight back and make groups realise the importance of focusing on mobilities but not just mobilities for the sake of my mobilities, but mobilities for the well-being of people both coming in and for people who are staying in.”

ILONA VON BETHLENFALVY (EU PROJECT OFFICER)

As the EU project officer, Ilona von Bethlenfalvy, has seen the development of the project and said she is happy to see all the results came to fruition and presented in the final conference. She added that the findings of the research come at a very timely and crucial moment where the European Commission and the Member States, as well as stakeholders are continuing to contemplate on migration and asylum policies and their implementation. She mentioned the fact that the new migration and asylum pact, which took so long to negotiate, just entered into force in early June 2024. It is also a crucial moment since the Commission just put forward an implementation plan of how the Commission agencies and Member States will be implementing these or will develop their own plans over the next two years – steps on realising a functioning migration system. According to her, the implementation plan covers the cornerstone of integration policies and seeks how to invest in long term cohesion of our societies and economic well-being.

Ilona von Bethlenfalvy, EU project officer, invites the academic community and researchers to continue engaging with the EU and policy makers.

Von Bethlenfalvy reiterated the importance of projects like the Welcoming Spaces in formulating policies. “All the priorities on future research activities and research funding will continue to channel the research that comes from projects like yours back into the policy making so that these are really based on the evidence from the field. You are really a part of a particularly important undertaking,” she says, stressing strategic dialogues between the Commission and the projects and the partners should be sustained. “I do invite you to stay closely engaged to share what works and what doesn't work, because what doesn't work is also extremely important in the policy making process and the understandings that you have gathered on revitalising communities in depopulated areas and in remote areas is very important to this,” she ended.

SETTING THE STAGE: Linking Global ageing to migration and rural-urban transformation worldwide: what are the challenges?

TANJA BASTIA

Tanja Bastia, professor of migration and development at the University of Manchester Global Development Institute kicked off the conference with a first keynote speech on ‘Migration, ageing and transnational care: a holistic, embodied approach.’ She started off reminding the audience that the proportion of people over the age of sixty is predicted to reach 22% of global population by 2050 and that 80 per cent of people over the age of sixty will be living in lower and middle-income countries by 2050. So, most people in old age will not be living in high-income countries and given that many of them work in the informal sector and that the introduction of universal cash transfer for elderly are not sufficient, these developments and figures are concerning.

Challenging Eurocentric perspectives, Prof. Bastia started her keynote by discussing ageing in the Global South, highlighting how most people work in the informal sector, that a minority have access to pensions and limited access to health services and concluding that few people make it to what Lasett (1987) calls the ‘third’ and ‘fourth age’. Drawing on extensive research conducted in Bolivia, Bastia then shifted the focus to discuss transnational care, outlining the contours of an embody approach to migration, ageing and care. Her collaborative research work examined, among others, how older people cope when their children migrant to other regions or countries to work. In one study, they conducted 100 interviews in five different regions, across socio-economic groups in five regions, to examine how people cope with ageing while their adult children are abroad. In this case, the research team opted for this approach, rather than ethnographic research to examine the full scope across different socio-economic groups and in different regions. Bolivia does have a universal cash transfer scheme, but only about 20% of the population in this age group receives a pension and only 1 in 5 out of these are women, because women are much less likely to work in the formal sector. In other words, one of the key findings of this study relates to the gendered

aspects of socio-economic inequalities. Another finding relates to the poor access to health care in rural regions, which also has implications for elderly populations that are forced to continue work and cannot access pensions.

Bastia then moved on to challenge the instrumentalist discourse around migration and care in destination countries, noting that migration cannot be *the* solution to ageing populations there, as migrants also age. Here, Bastia also referred to the work of Alistair Hunter on ageing migrants in France. This final part of the keynote centred on the importance of framing and a broad, rights-based approach to migration and care. Such an approach recognises that migrants are not just workers, but people with families and a right to have social connections. Here, Bastia also noted that in some Asian countries and increasingly in Europe too, temporariness is enforced on migrant workers, which means that they are not allowed family unification, or even family planning. Again, she highlighted how such injustices are gendered, with women facing more restrictions, such as pregnancy tests. Here, the focus was on how migration is framed within broader socio-economic changes and the talk was wrapped up, returning to an important cross-cutting theme, the potential and merits of an embodied perspective, which, for instance, also considers how joy can be a form of resistance.

Keynoter speaker, Prof. Tanja Bastia's talk on Migration, ageing and transnational care: a holistic, embodied approach.

HELGA A.G. DE VALK

Prof. dr. Helga A.G. de Valk set the stage with a second keynote, bringing in a demographic perspective on the core themes of the Welcoming Spaces conference. Building on her longstanding research on migration and demography, as well as work for the (Dutch) Government Commission on Demographic developments, her talk centers on three points. To contextualise these three arguments, Prof. De Valk first traced how demography developed from projecting population trends to developing and working with different future scenarios, 'what if…' and using these scenarios as a starting point for debates on (in)equality. What is clear, even with different scenarios, is that the population in countries such as the Netherlands would be shrinking without migration. In line with the first keynote, Prof. de Valk also criticised the framing of

migration as a solution to ageing populations, however, she notes it can be important for certain regions or sectors.

The second keynote speaker, Prof. dr. Helga A.G. de Valk on demography and migration myths.

This keynote was structured around three migration myths which the keynote speaker critically interrogated. First, the idea that ageing is solely the consequence of increased life expectancy, while in fact it is more related to fertility rates and to fewer births. Here, the keynote speaker noted life expectancy is not a given, but stratified, unevenly distributed, and linked to gender, education among others. The second myth Helga discussed is the idea that migration to the Netherlands and Europe is mostly driven by asylum migration. In relation to asylum, Prof. de Valk also criticised how a fixation on asylum migration is connected to social-spatial exclusion, such as restrictive regimes and differentiated arrival pathways and infrastructures. The third and last myth the keynote brought into focus, relates to the idea that population density is a good indicator for policy. Here, she gave the example of Utrecht being the most densely populated area, however, in this case, we are seeing a lot of single households, rather than family households, so it very much depends on how population density is measured. In this regard, the keynote speaker prompted the audience to reconsider this commonplace idea about Dutch population density and to return to think about kinds of households.

In conclusion, this keynote highlighted the importance of forward-looking long-term perspectives across different domains. Europe's population is going to shrink, we need to critically interrogate Eurocentric perspectives, we need to pay attention regional diversity and above all, for competitive and resilient societies we need everybody.

MONIQUE KREMER

The morning program was wrapped up by *Monique Kremer*, chair of the Dutch Advisory Council on Migration and an endowed professor on citizens and the welfare state in a superdiverse context with several timely reflections on the keynote talks and current political climate.

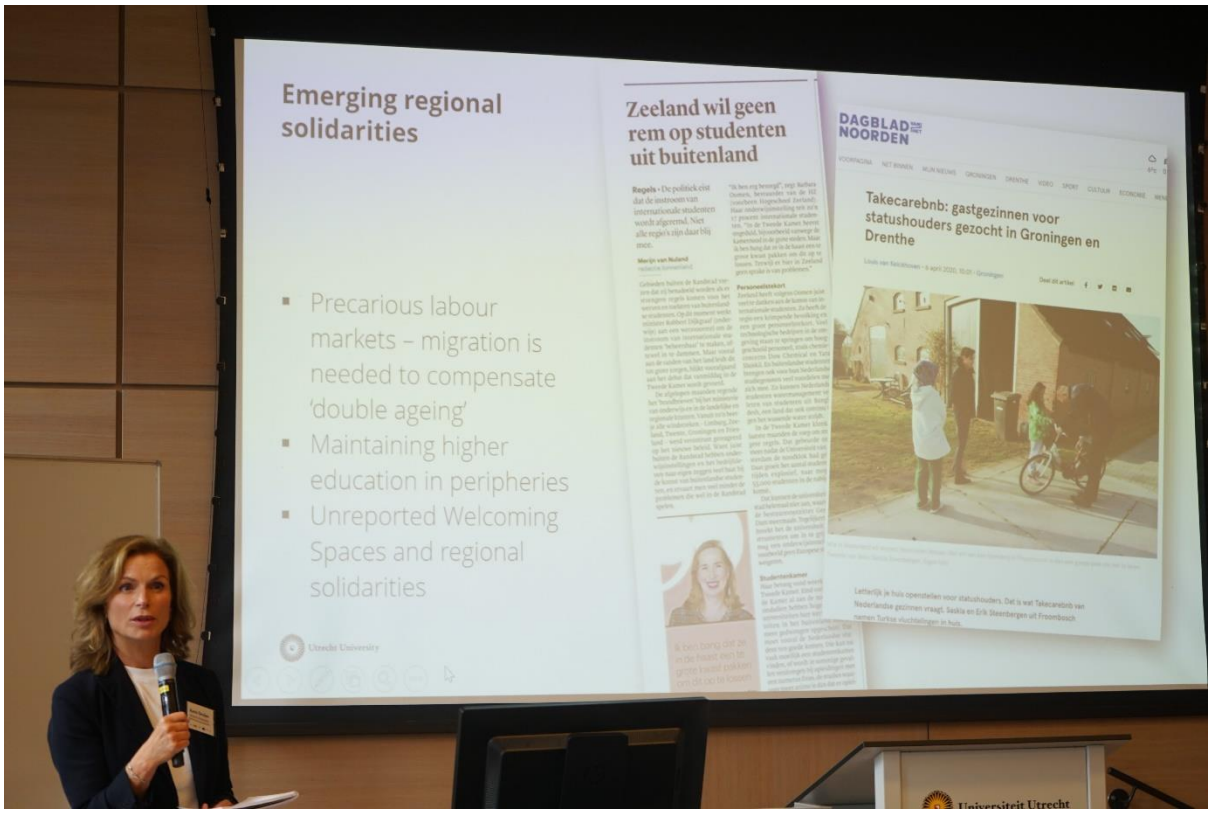
Prof. dr. Monique Kremer sharing reflections on keynote speeches and current political developments in the Netherlands and Europe.

LESSONS FROM H2020 WELCOMING SPACES & BOOK LAUNCH

DR. KARIN GEUIJEN /editorial team

After the formal opening and setting the stage for discussions, Dr. Karin Geuijen, programme coordinator of the Welcoming Spaces, briefly talked about the project's upcoming book to be published by Elgar. The book will present research outcomes conducted in the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Italy, and Poland. One of the important aspects of the book is it addresses the negative public opinion and policies surrounding migration, asylum seekers, and depopulated areas. According to her, it will highlight a parallel world where innovative, bottom-up solutions benefit both migrants and local

inhabitants. These solutions involve multi-stakeholder collaborations across various levels, including social enterprises, public organisations, and local authorities.



Dr. Karin Geuijen on the findings and contents of the Welcoming Spaces book.

The book will feature five stories - each showcasing significant findings from the research in the five countries (Germany, Spain, Poland, Italy, The Netherlands). The stories will cover diverse topics, such as migrants working in healthcare and energy transition, and new institutional forms of collaboration. Despite acknowledging existing problems, the book aims to offer a hopeful perspective on how these initiatives are already making a positive impact.

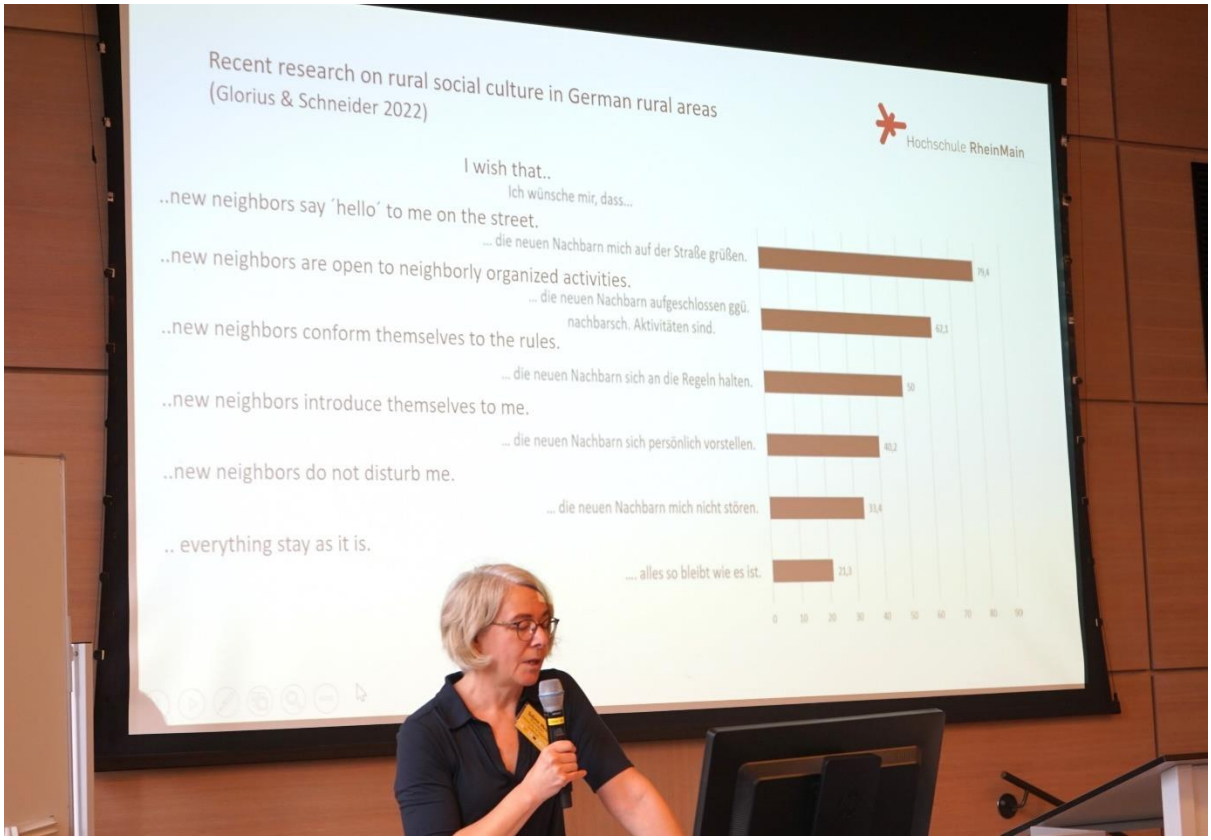
The stories in the book were briefly presented by different researchers of the project who also discussed the lessons learned.

GERMANY (Dr. Sabine Meier, RheinMain University of Applied Sciences)

Dr. Sabine Meier pointed on the role of visibility of diversity in rural areas and its impact on the successful emplacement of migrants. She explored how research, like the Welcoming Spaces programme, has contributed to this visibility. Meier argued that visibility of migrants' activities—such as their presence in public spaces, economic and religious activities, and social engagements—can lead to empowerment and social recognition. However, she noted that studies also show mixed results on whether visibility leads to social recognition, with some suggesting it may lead to avoidance

strategies instead. Meier emphasised the importance of visibility for empowerment and social recognition, particularly in rural areas, and highlighted the need for further research to understand its impact.

“From a subjective perspective, migrants can step out of the private realm and need certain abilities and courage to do that. From a societal perspective, I think that is an essential prerequisite for social recognition for a successful emplacement of migrants,” she said.



Dr. Sabine Meier points out the visibility of migrants and rural culture.

In Germany, she added, there is also a discussion about self-evident and non-verbal ways of dealing with differences, but these studies are based on mostly urban situations. When looking at rural situations, the question arises what is specific in the social culture of rural areas.

The social culture in rural areas is dual, she explained, with no clear differences between urban and rural areas. However, there is a special social culture that pressures migrants to adopt local customs. This is combined with a shift from integration policies towards assimilation policies, which overshadows the social cultural pressure to adopt local customs.

In some rural areas, the increased pressure to adapt to local customs and the impossibility of development activities under anonymity make public spaces in rural areas less anonymous than in urban spaces. This pressure to develop and be open and visible makes migrants feel less free to make their activities publicly visible.

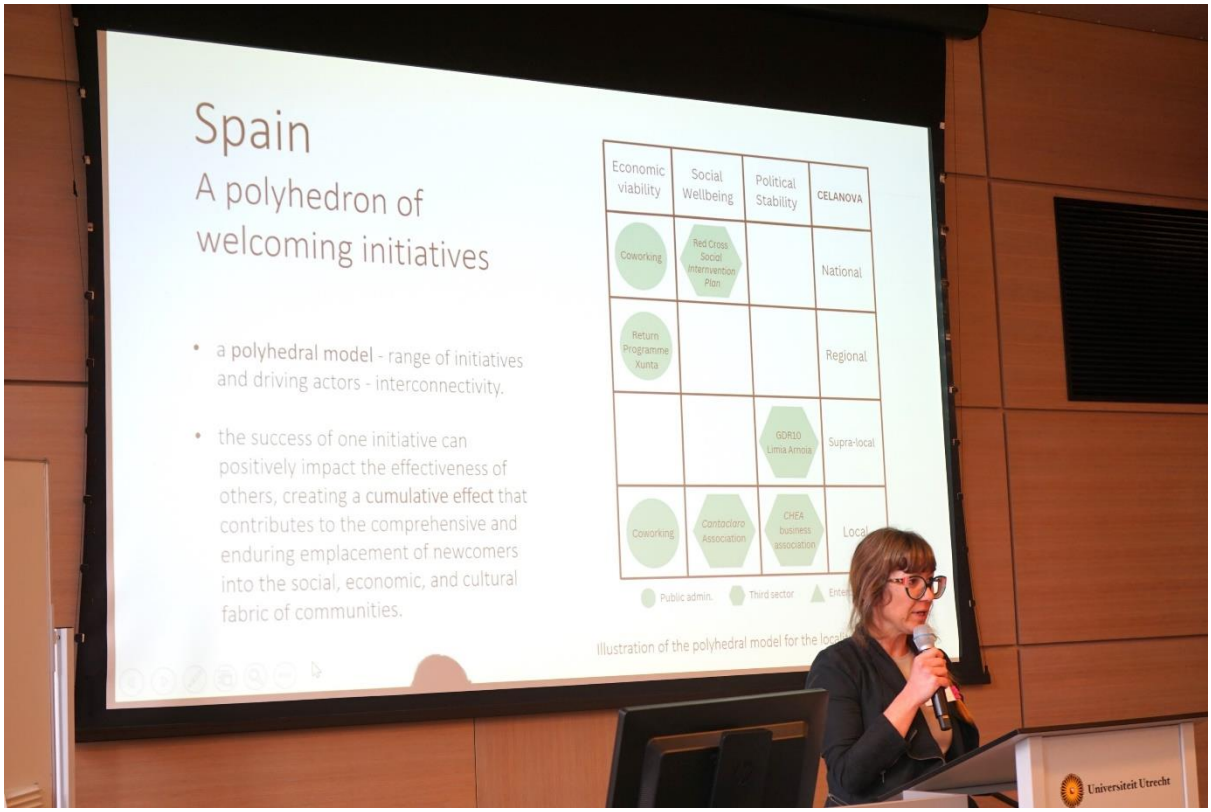
She emphasised that for future research on emplacements, researchers can highlight places where diversity is perceived as a matter of course, such as the cases in Altenburg. These awakened housing counteract the expectation of conformity to typical norms of rural social life, creating a kind of island with urban diversity within rural areas.

Researchers can accompany migrants in developing methods and skills, which are essential for self-recognition and empowerment. By empowering people and fostering a sense of community, researchers can help migrants navigate the challenges of integrating into urban environments.

SPAIN (Dr. Keina Raquel Espiñeira González -Universidade da Coruña)

Dr. Espiñeira González started her presentation with a caveat that Spain has a historical territorial imbalance due to Franco's policies, leading to significant rural-to-urban and international migration. Recently, there has been a trend of migrants moving to rural areas, with nearly 10% of the rural population being foreign-born by 2020. Unlike other European countries, Spain's migration is driven by labor and family factors, with policies focused on employment integration.

A major challenge in Spain is the fragmentation of local welcoming initiatives due to a lack of coordinated state policies. However, this fragmentation has also revealed potential through diverse, multi-layered initiatives, termed as a "polyhedral" model. These initiatives, such as regional return programs, migrant-led associations, and co-working centers, work complementarily to support migrant integration and local development. The interconnectivity of these initiatives enhances overall inclusiveness and sustainability, creating a cumulative positive impact on the emplacement of newcomers.



Dr Espiñeira González says the key feature of this "polyhedral" model is the interconnectivity of diverse initiatives.

She presented a matrix that highlights multi-layered initiatives in different territorial spheres that work together. For example, a regional return program has brought descendants of historical Spanish immigrants, particularly from Venezuela to Spain. These arrivals led to the formation of Cantaclaro, a migrant-led association providing support and community activities. Then, as new people arrived, and as most of newcomers demanded adjustments for improving their employability, the Red Cross activated training courses, and some of the newcomers also started volunteering there. Furthermore, initiatives include co-working centers supported by the local administration fostering new local businesses, a quarter of which are now led by migrant settlers.

Dr. Espiñeira González pointed out that the key feature of this "polyhedral" model is the interconnectivity of diverse initiatives, enhancing inclusiveness and sustainability. The success of one initiative positively impacts others, creating a cumulative effect that supports the comprehensive emplacement of newcomers. The polyhedral model has transformative potential, integrating various initiatives to meet community needs and fostering a collective effort to create welcoming environments.

POLAND (Dr. Joanna Zuzanna Popławska, Warsaw School of Economics SGH)

Dr. Popławska recalled that four years ago, when the Polish team joined a project on rural areas and welcoming initiatives, they initially struggled to find relevant case

studies. They discovered that welcoming initiatives were more common in medium-sized cities with asylum seeker centers. These initiatives included not only basic needs like language lessons and psychological support but also creative activities to engage migrants, especially women.

How Poland sees migration has changed due to the influx of Ukrainian refugees, says Dr. Popławska

The situation changed significantly with the full-scale war in Ukraine, leading to a large influx of Ukrainian migrants. Initially, Poland was seen as a hostile country, but a strong social movement emerged to support Ukrainian migrants. This movement was short-term, but it led to favorable government policies, such as opening the labor market to Ukrainians, allowing them to become self-sufficient.

The research revealed many surprising findings, including the presence of migrants in smaller communities and numerous initiatives by both NGOs and local authorities. Despite their efforts, local authorities often did not want to participate in the research. Overall, the situation in Poland has evolved, showing a mix of challenges and positive developments in welcoming migrants.

ITALY (Dr. Ester Driel, Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht University)

Dr. Driel started her presentation with a premise that migration is portrayed as a problem, as a threat, and shrinking areas are either invisible, maybe romanticised as a long-forgotten place, nice for holidays, but nothing else. She spent years doing research in the town of Riace in Calabria, Italy. “This welcoming space has really created an alternative narrative for those shrinking areas, which has created an alternative,

inclusive narrative by welcoming migrants," she said while showing photos of the place. The welcoming initiative portrays Riace as a global village where the history of emigration and the future of immigration merge. The countryside in Italy is characterised by a lot of precarities, such as a lack of infrastructure. In this village, for example, there was a bus only once a day. When migrants started arriving in the area by boat from the African continent, the municipalities, local NGOs and with funding by the national and EU programs collaborated to create this global village where everybody is welcome. In overcoming shared precarities, Dr. Driel said the mayor that a shared initiative created by newcomers and the local population alike is important.

The welcoming space of Riace has created an alternative narrative for those shrinking areas, says Dr. Driel.

"Well, you can imagine if you don't have a car what that implies, and you see here that on the local level, with the help of newcomers, they created a sustainable garbage service, for example, because also garbage just simply wasn't picked up in this town…"

Migrants and locals have collaborated to address local issues, such as creating a sustainable garbage service and reconstructing fruit and vegetable terraces. These efforts symbolise practical and symbolic actions to improve the community. However, restrictive national policies in 2018 led to the collapse of many such initiatives, raising questions about the sustainability of these efforts under changing political climates.

NETHERLANDS (Dr. Marlies Meijer, Wageningen University)/Dr. Sara Miellet (Utrecht University)

Dr. Marlies Meijer, representing the Dutch team, discussed the findings from four years of research on migration and welcoming initiatives in the Netherlands.

“What we can see is that the debate has changed quite a bit. In the Netherlands, we can see that we presented in the recent elections, also in European elections, and we can see that the debate regarding migration has harshened. But that's not the only debate that touches on rural areas.

Despite changing debates on migration and peripheral areas, local and regional countercurrents are emerging, showing regional solidarities.

We can see in the Netherlands there is a peripheralisation of the migration debates, wherein rural areas are increasingly looked at as favorable areas for receiving migrants. This feeds into geographies of discontent, wherein rural people living in rural areas increasingly felt that they are not treated the same, not having the same opportunities as people living in other areas,” she said.

She added that findings in their research demonstrate quite sharply that there are regional inequalities in the Netherlands as well. “These are different from the discontent about the migration debate, but these are intertangled debates feeding into the discontent. What we also saw, hopefully, is that these regional inequalities are recognised, slowly but steadily, at national level politics as well.”

Despite the national and media debates, local and regional countercurrents are emerging, showing regional solidarities. Migrants help address economic inequalities, and educational institutions value international students. Many welcoming initiatives,

often unreported in national media, are found in regional areas, such as Take Care BnB or De Thuisgevers, which foster good neighbor relations between locals and newcomers.

OVERCOMING BOTTLENECKS AND FINDING INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

This second part of the conference focused on bottlenecks and corresponding innovative solutions, starting of with an interactive conversation between a social entrepreneur and welcoming spaces researcher, followed by a series of short presentations from welcoming spaces researchers.

BLERTA BAJRAMI | Social entrepreneur, *Partisan Medical Mercenaries*

Choosing an interview format Sara Miellet, post-doc researcher on the Welcoming Spaces project conversed with Blerta Bjrami, who is an entrepreneur and professional in the care sector, who set up the "Partisan Medical Mercenaries" (see also Welcoming Spaces country report on the Netherlands). This was an interesting example that shows how challenges can be overcome with creative solutions. Partisan Medical Mercenaries is an international recruitment company that helps recognised refugees living in the Netherlands and care professionals from outside the EU to find a job in the Dutch health care sector, mostly in the region of Friesland. The company addresses multiple needs at the same time, including the shortage of employees in the Dutch care sector, unemployment in countries such as Kosovo, as well as the challenge of refugees living in the Netherlands to find suitable employment.

Blerta Bajrami, whose family fled in the 1990s from Kosovo, is a social entrepreneur who identified several challenges when working as a manger in the care sector, came up with a solution which she then pitched to governmental and care organisations. She found people who wanted to invest, and they started the plan.

Impact: She noted how when people get opportunities, you see them grow, be independent, become alive and make a difference. There is an increase in education and freedom of decision. She states that through this project, care organisations get in touch with motivated professionals, who can support their families back home. Also, she stresses an increase in diversity in the often ethnically homogenous Frisian villages. Moreover, by cooperating with university specialised training and education is facilitated which allows migrants who come and work in the care sector in the Netherlands to further build their knowledge. Another value that she stresses is important in her work, is to support women to get financially independent which impacts the range of choices they can take. Most participants are women, and many are building a life here in the long run, enjoying the autonomy they get in this situation.

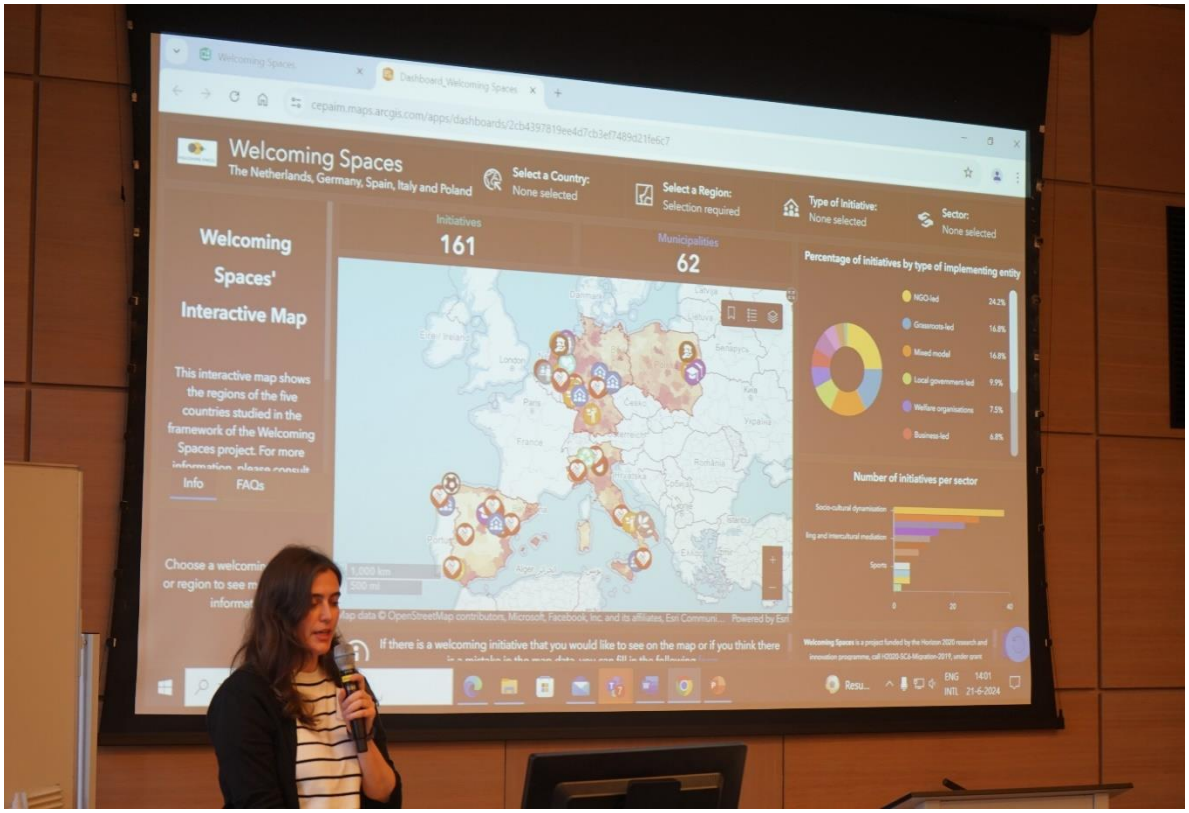
Social entrepreneur and Partisan Medical Mercenaries founder Blerta Bajrami in conversation with Welcoming Spaces postdoctoral researcher Sara Miellet.

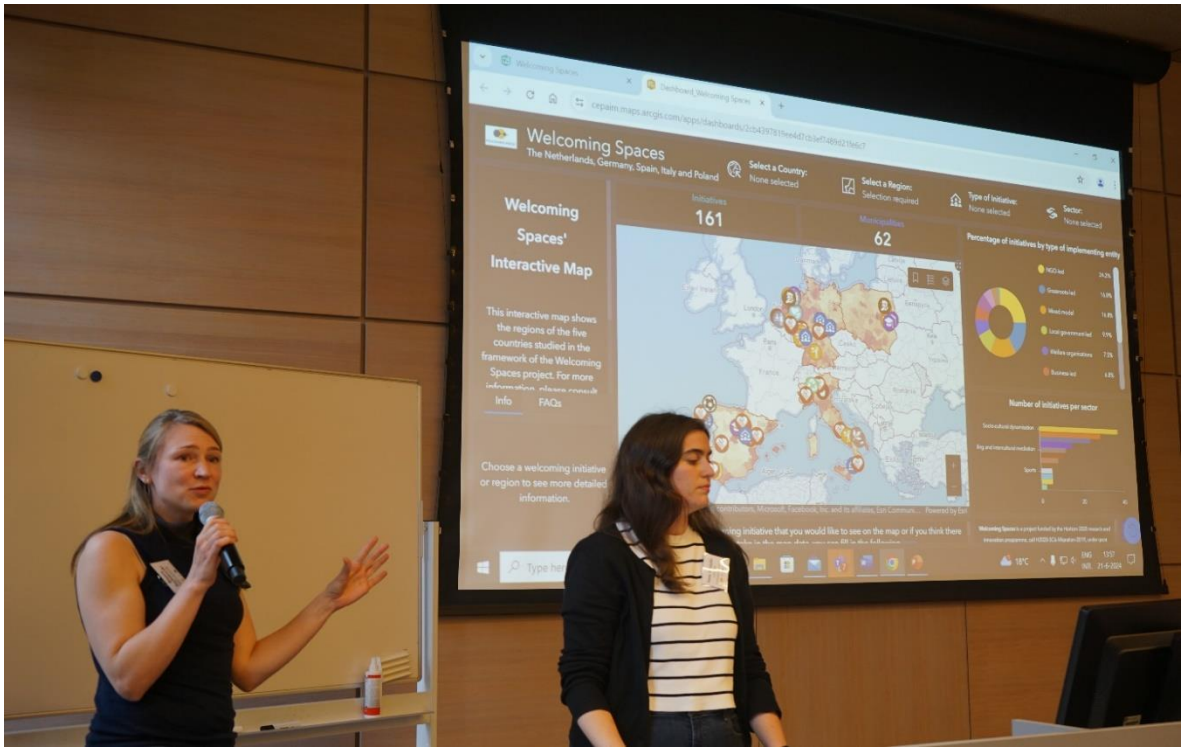
Challenges are to think about how to attain a work permit in a migration system in which this may be difficult for non-EU migrants like the Netherlands. When you want to come and work here you need a higher income than that nurses would usually have. Collaborating with universities which allows migrants to combine study and work can be an opportunity to gain a residence permit in the Netherlands, while building sustainable prospects to stay in the country. One challenge that is pointed out is that sometimes, prior educational attainments are not recognised so that migrants who have studied abroad need to do additional studies in the Netherlands. Something related to the bigger issue of diploma recognition.

The current political situation may be challenging now, immigration is criticised and life for migrants may need to become more difficult. She stresses the importance of collaborating among different actors: the ministry, organisation, and entrepreneurs with the ideas. What we do is not a dream but a reality, we need people with the same vision and highlight that we can create a win-win situation.

Interactive Map Welcoming Spaces

IRENE ALMAZÁN, ADOLFO PATÓN, MARÍA GARCÍA TARANCÓN | CEPAIM, SPAIN
DR. BIANCA SYTNIEWSKI | UTRECHT UNIVERSITY





Irene Almazán (CEPAIM) and Bianca Sytniewski present the interactive map of Welcoming Spaces.

Irene Almazán led the work package on the community of practice together with Carmen Ayllon. Irene is presenting the interactive map of Welcoming Spaces. Building on the fieldwork of the welcoming spaces researchers they created an interactive map that can serve as a tool for organisers, policy makers and researchers. Spreading inspiration, ideas, and innovative solutions for the Community of practice.

Bianca Sytniewski addresses the methodological considerations of creating the map. The idea was to get a representational, ethical, and technical overview. She recognises there is a selection bias and reflects on this shortly. She stresses that one also needs to reflect on not doing harm by making data available or not. While wanting to making data as available as possible you also want to address confidentiality and privacy issues. Map can empower people by becoming more visible, but some people may not want to become possible for safety reasons.

Irene Almazán adds that the map features different filters that facilitates the way around, e.g., to look at care initiatives related to elderly care. Not only description of the initiatives can be found but also challenges and bottlenecks. You can also select the type of initiatives, e.g., migrant led information. Currently there is a process of contacting all the initiatives and asking people to send them feedback in the form of a form available in different languages to increase participation. It is a living tool and one can adapt it by doing it.

Economic revitalisation

LAURA OSO CASAS | *UNIVERSIDADE DA CORUÑA*

Presents ways to analyse the labour market in shrinking areas in rural areas, Prof.dr. Laura Oso Casas, demonstrates how labour market sedimentation processes are related to intra and intergenerational social mobility trajectories of long-term residents in shrinking areas. She gives the example of Burela in Spain in which an Aluminium factory opened and most long-term residents who worked in the fishing sector went to work in that factory under better labour conditions, freeing jobs in fishing. Mostly migrants took on those jobs subsequently. While a way of intragenerational upward social mobility for long term residents, social mobility of the migrants has been blocked. They have difficulty gaining official recognition of education and work and migrant children experience high rates of dropping out of school.

Prof. Laura Oso presents the findings on the labour market in shrinking rural areas.

Sustainability depends on the economies that are in crises. There are exploitative conditions and rotation of migrant workers. To sustain migration in shrinking areas, according to Oso, we cannot just have rotation workers in precarious positions. Migration policies that foster circular migration therefore do not foster the sustainability of shrinking areas and welcoming spaces, which also takes other factors into account such as the social, intergenerational, and environmental sustainability instead of purely economic sustainability. But there is hope, she says: there are some initiatives that try to get out of the labour market segmentation, e.g., by initiatives fostering education of migrants (Germany), entrepreneurship opportunities for migrants (Celanova). She ends by stressing the need for suitable migration policy and local development policy to develop sustainable welcoming spaces.

JOANNA ZUZANNA POPŁAWSKA | *WARSAW SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS*

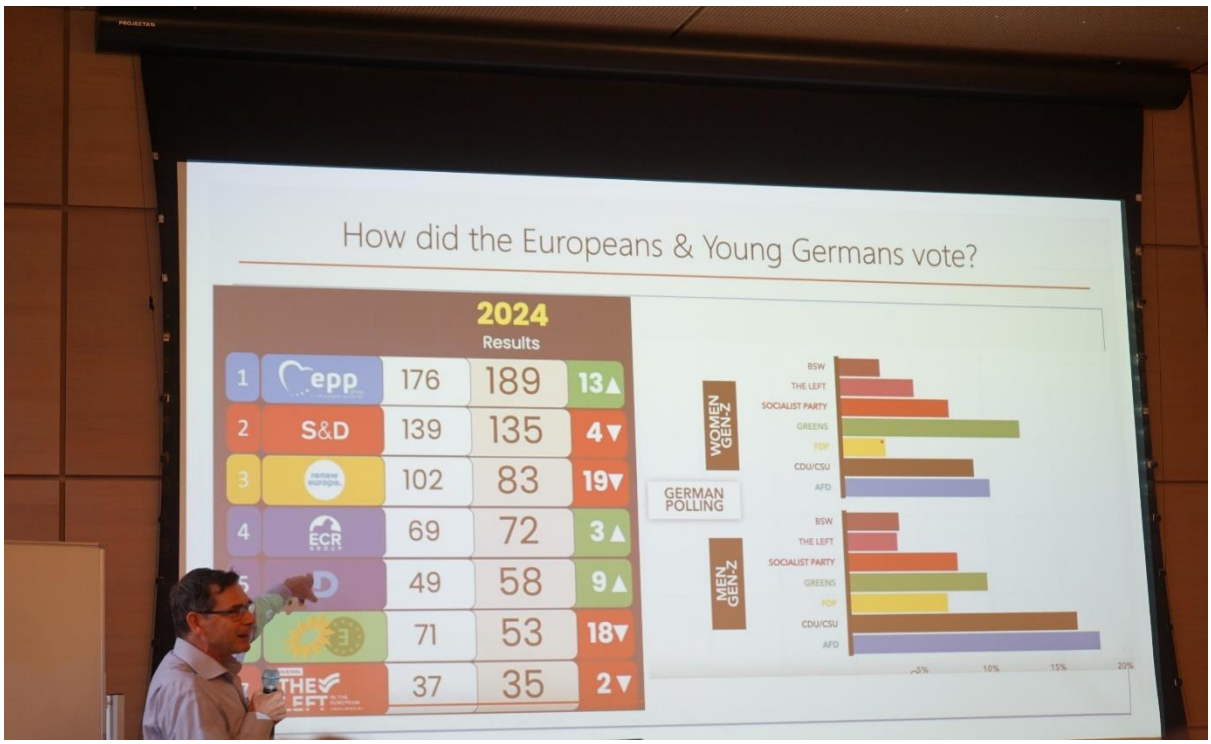
Dr. Joanna Zuzanna Popławska reflects that in Poland there is not so much attention for sustainability, but more of a focus on a pragmatic economic approach. There is hostility towards migration, but migrants come to Poland from different regions regardless, e.g., Ukraine, Chechnya, several African countries. Why do they come, regardless of the hostile politics? She states that there is a need for migrants in the labour market considering out-migration and aging. In the shrinking areas there are a lot of middle-sized cities that are left behind by young people who do not find attractive jobs or sufficient salaries. Those jobs are taken up by temporary Ukrainian migrants without

families. There were some initiatives, trainings for Chechen women, and cooperatives created that also undocumented Chechen women can make a living by working there.

Political resistance & instability

JOSE RICADO MARTINS | *UTRECHT UNIVERSITY*

Dr. Ricardo Martins highlights that we have recently seen a shift in politics with the rise of the right, which of course also has consequences for the context in which we research. He asks the question: What are the reasons for this shift? He critiques that the complexity of the political debate is often not taken into consideration, instead the debates about politics in Europe are black and white and polarised. Complex political systems in global south, as in Europe are represented in simplified ways. We not only, he argues, see a rise in extreme right-wing support but also that the political spectrum is moving to the right, also in the case of Germany social democrats are taking on more neoliberal policies. We observe a shift from a social to a managerial state and more people being left behind. But these things are often not recognised in dominant debates, and instead attention is pointed towards the most extremist sides of politics. That, he argues, will not solve the problem but the situation will become worse. He thus asks, how to build a more inclusive society instead?



Ricardo Martins points to the results of the last elections in Germany and what do the numbers mean? Photo: Jofelle Tesorio/Welcoming Spaces

He shifts the attention to looking at how people have voted over time and why they have voted in that way. He amongst others addresses a right in support for right wing populist parties in Germany among young male voters and support for the greens among young female voters. Topics that move voters are peace keeping and security is a big concern, social welfare, migrants, refugees, climate change, and economic reasons. Therefore, the welfare state and economic prosperities also need to be prioritised. He encourages the listeners that there is a need address the concerns of right-wing voters, why do they vote like this?

Social cohesion

SARA MIELLET | *UTRECHT UNIVERSITY*

Sara Miellet, post-doc researcher on the project starts out by considering how research on social cohesion is often focused on the precarity of migrants living in shrinking areas and has revealed a wealth of insight into particular semi-public places and actors, such as libraries and welfare organisations. However, building on her research in Dutch peripheralised regions, she stresses there is a broad range of actors involved, apart from these traditional players. How to make sense of this development and the collaborations of different actors in peripheralised regions? Another question that she brings into focus is how Dutch political discourses overshadow or render invisible emerging new forms of regional solidarity as well as multi-actor collaborations in Dutch peripheralised regions.

Especially a shift in focus from initiatives *for migrants* to also look at initiatives addressing other broader challenges in those communities can be important. She highlights her favourite *new* kinds of players, like eco-villages—that also offer housing to refugees, as well as other initiatives, such as the “thuisgevers” (home givers) initiative. She also notes that housing, education, and care organisations are increasingly claiming a stake in debates about migration.

Karin Geuijen and Sara Miellet discuss about support ecosystems for welcoming initiatives.

KARIN GEUIJEN | *UTRECHT UNIVERSITY*

Karin Geuijen, raises the importance of supporting initiatives, also stressing that there are challenges and "dark sides". She reflects that we see a lot of good but also fragmented practices, there are all kinds of initiatives, but they are hardly connected. There is a lot of reinventing the wheel. Questions she asks are: How can we learn from the existing practices? What are success factors, what works for whom and under which conditions? She states that we need a community of practice, a learning community and accelerators, universities and universities of applied sciences can invest in those accelerators. Temporary funding is another issue—project funding lasts for several years and then it stops. There is also a need to invest in organisation, overhead costs. Another point is that initiatives depend on the vitality of the founders and central figures running the shows, other actors including private companies and investors need to be involved and make investments. There is not just joy and fun, in order to flourish they need support.

LETICIA SANTABALLA | *UNIVERSIDADE DA CORUÑA*

Leticia Santaballa makes the point that bottom-up Initiatives address social needs that are not addressed by more established sector. Communities feel the need for social initiatives. The social dimension of wellbeing. It is easy to find policies on economic

revitalisation and not so much on social wellbeing in Italy and Spain. In the project, wellbeing was conceptualised as multilayered and collective. Core concepts were connectivity, access to services, housing, home making practices and relation to natural environment. Migrants are seen as agents who greatly contribute to the social wellbeing but do not actually experience the same level of social wellbeing of long-term inhabitants in those areas. Another observation is that some initiatives manage to link the needs of the migrant newcomers and broader communities.

Leticia Santaballa focuses on linking the needs of migrants and community.

ILSE VAN LIEMPT | *UTRECHT UNIVERSITY*

Dr. Ilse van Liempt, the discussant, highlights the importance of pointing out the structural conditions under which the welcoming initiatives take place, as Ricardo Martins and Laura Oso did. The Partisan medical mercenaries initiatives showed interesting example, that shows a lot of courage to work under these challenging structural conditions. While asylum seekers are allowed to work now, there are still a lot of obstacles. She streeses the importance of migrants and refugees to have space to contribute and take a lead in those initiatives. She also raises questions about the dissemination of the interactive map. She also compliments the use of the concept of emplacement and is curious to hear more about how it is defined, also in relation to integration.

Response Irene: Sustainability of the map, the licences have been renewed for a few more years and we will keep updating it, Fundacion Cepaim will be taking responsibility for it, and it will be integrated on their website. Irene will probably oversee that.

Response Prof. Dr. Annelies Zoomers: Listening to the different examples showed that a systemic approach is necessary, and this tool can provide an overview. It would be great to facilitate that all the information collected in the Horizon sister projects on this and related topics, what we all have in common. It would be great if this would be facilitated (addressing Ilona).

She reflects that emplacement came into the program because we were aware of the area itself, when you look at the future of people in areas and find out how diverse it is, emplacement comes up, because you want to improve the situation of people in those areas, not just migrants. Important to bring people together and look into the future. Move away from distinction of migrants and non migrant.

Dr. Sara Miellet: even emplacement as a term is seen as migrant emplacement. But all residents seek emplacement and multiple emplacements are actually entangled. We try to de-migrantise.

Closing by moderator Dr. Dora Sampaio.

MOVING FORWARD: LEARNING FROM GOOD PRACTICES

The session *Moving forward: Learning from good practices* was made more alive by presenters who were involved and saw firsthand initiatives that really work on the ground and made an impact on the communities but in most cases remained under the radar.

BEN VAN ESSEN (SBE): Power of meaningful organisational partnerships and cross-border contacts

Ben van Essen, from Samenwerkingsverband Burgerkracht Europa (SBE), a Dutch village association covering various initiatives, opens the session on the power of meaningful organisational partnerships and cross-border contacts. It is also one of the partners of the Welcoming Spaces project through the LVKK, a joint venture of all provincial associations for small centers and villages, which covers about 4000 local initiatives in the Netherlands. Van Essen said that a few years ago they have thought of the same question about depopulating areas, ageing and migration – intertwined issues that need more answers.

SBE's members are people in the grassroots who are working on the livability in their own surroundings, so they have seen the dynamics on the ground themselves. "We saw

that this is not only a question that is in the Netherlands, but it is also a question in other countries," he said.

Ben van Essen of SBE sees firsthand the importance of welcoming initiatives.

"...demography, ageing, less facilities. All these kinds of things and what we see is that when you sit together in these three countries, that these challenges are the same, but the way we solve them is quite different and it is nice to learn from each other."

From that van Essen and his colleagues built a kind of cross-border network with partners in Germany and in Flanders where every year they choose a theme to bring the exchange between these three countries. Last year, for example, they organised together with the Welcoming Spaces, a conference and workshops that investigate the theme 'cooperating with newcomers'.

"It is about cooperation. It is not so much about integration as it is about cooperation. That was the theme and we built up a programme with seven events in the last year. The biggest event was in June, when we had a bigger symposium with 150 participants, and we discussed a lot of examples. How? In these different countries there are initiatives like we heard today, there are people in all kinds of ways trying to collaborate with newcomers."

He cited one example in the village of Cranendonck in Sourthern Netherlands, where there is an asylum center. In the beginning, a lot of conflicts arouse from the asylum centre, but many people stood up and formed a collective to organise events and things

to come together with the migrants – such as biking together, playing football together, and other collective activities. “It is encouraging that even in such a difficult situation, most polarised, still in this situation, people stand up and try to make the connection in some kind of way, break up disconnection,” he said.

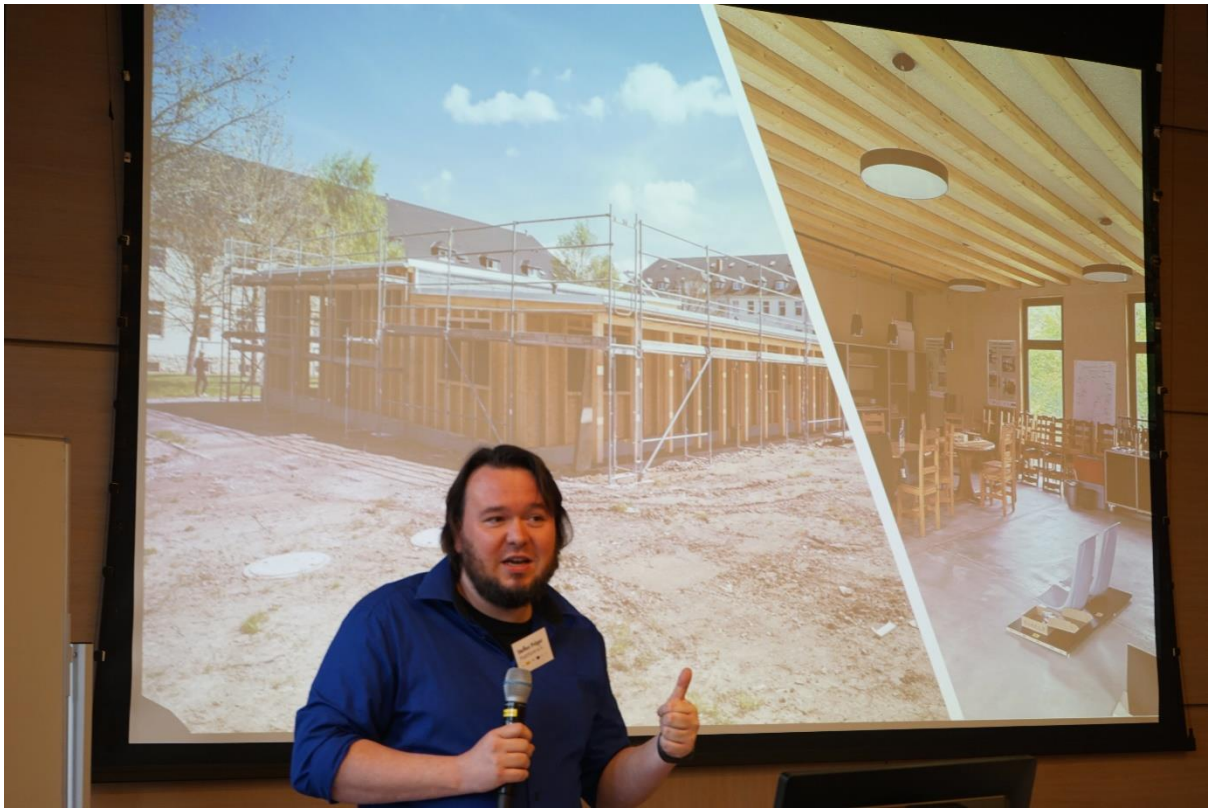
He also gave an example in his municipality in Limburg which already has a tradition of receiving migrant workers. The workers at first were mostly Polish and now from all over Europe, mostly Eastern Europe and there also is an initiative from the civilians. It has been 15 years, to organise all kinds of events to bring these two groups of people together, the villagers and the migrants.

He says that being with SBE, he has witnessed incredibly positive initiatives organised by the community where the connection between newcomers and local people is strengthened. He also emphasised the power of theater and music to bring people together, where people learn how not to think black in black and white. “Music is a very good way of communicating,” he said.

At the end, he stressed that all the results of the conferences and workshops and the initiatives should be shared and discussed continuously with many people. “It is on the one hand about fragmentation, yes, but for me it is more. Why in this time where we need to discuss the future of migration because migration will not go away. It will even get bigger in some kind of way. Although there are all kinds of discussions, what would be nicer is that there are good examples of other ways of looking at this issue of migration…. Other people should also hear these good stories not only because it is a compliment to your work, but it is necessary in the time where we live.””

STEFFEN PRÄGER (Plattform e.V.): Innovative inclusive practices in Germany

To compliment what Ben van Essen said about good examples, Steffen Prager, CEO of Plattform E.V., a German societal organisation that focuses on innovative inclusive practice, showed multiple photos of initiatives in the eastern Germany that his organisation is supporting. Plattform acts as an intermediary, supporting civil society projects and organisations. They aim for sustainability and long-term solutions, including economic participation for refugees and asylum seekers.



Stephan Prager, CEO of Plattform E.v., shows an initiative they are supporting in Saalfeld, Germany.

He cited the example of Touringa in Saalfeld, a town of 30,000 inhabitants.

“Saalfeld had to make some very severe decisions in 2015, 2016 when the huge intake of refugees started. They needed to host them in the very first place. Because of the German law, every city, every town needs to hold a specific number of people. And they were arriving there with buses. So, they decided where their capacities are there.”

Prager said the city chose buildings in the periphery that looked like an old Soviet-style military barracks converted into a social housing. “Most of it stood empty before the intake of the refugees. Nowadays there are thousands of people living there. The average age in this quarter is 35 years. Just thinking about the implications of it. It is like 25 nationalities or something. The variety is so high, you could not even start talking about that. So, and of course that brings implications also in consideration of the population that lives there. “

They recognised the need for a long-term solution to integrate refugees and asylum seekers into society. “… the people of Saalfeld really quickly came through is that you would need to have a long-term perspective. You would really need to be invested into the whole thing,” he said. Instead of following the usual approach, they aimed for transformative change.

Creating a Welcoming Space:

- Over eight years, with active participation from residents, they developed a “vakhuis” (working house).
- It is not just about physical space; it’s the integrated concept that matters.
- The accelerator within the space allows people to create prototypes, develop skills, and connect with local companies.

Impact:

- Addressing labor force shortages in the region.
- Fostering connections between diverse communities.
- Countering far-right sentiments through collaboration and shared purpose.

In summary, Prager said, a physical space combined with an innovative approach can lead to lasting positive change.

SARA MIELLET (Utrecht University) & KEINA RAQUEL ESPIÑEIRA GONZÁLEZ (Universidade da Coruña): **Importance of migrants/citizen engagement in emplacement**

Dr. Sara Miellet started with their research focus where they examined role of migrants and citizens in creating and sustaining welcoming initiatives. The project critically questioned instrumentalist thinking that views migrants solely as catalysts for regional revitalisation. She said civic engagement, regardless of citizenship status, was a central theme.

Sara Miellet says there should also be a rethink of narratives beyond marginalised groups.

So she said they created an approach where they moved away from thematic discussions (e.g., social cohesion) and focused on community organisers' perspectives. They explored starting conditions, impacts, overlooked aspects, and challenges faced by these initiatives.

Throughout the research they documented best practices, and observations, along the way, such as:

- Collective care responses were observed in community initiatives.
- Not all newcomer groups are the same; some are more precarious.
- Civic Engagement and rights. Active community involvement strengthened focus on rights (beyond economic considerations). Examples include a migrant women's association in Burela and asylum seekers in Germany, where active community involvement helped some denied asylum seekers regularise their residency.
- Communities are challenging marginalisation and places. Community initiatives challenge the marginalisation of people and the perception of passive rural regions. Example from Germany: "FACK" project transformed a building, allowing young residents to develop city plans.
- Critique of top-down narratives: Young people wanted practical facilities (shopping malls, skate ramps) over more culture.

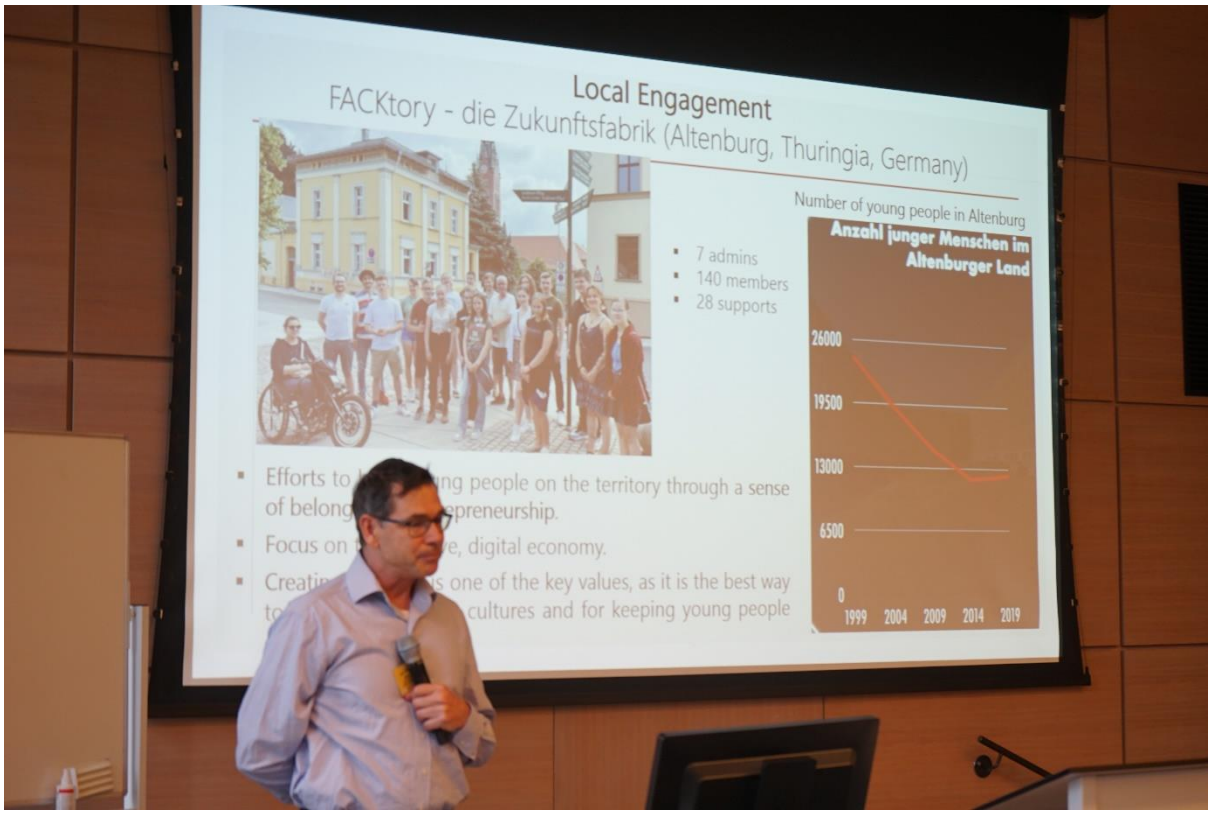
Alternative Narratives:

- A rethink of narratives beyond marginalised groups.
- Extreme examples in the Netherlands and Spain: Some communities resist outsiders to protect ecological resources.

In conclusion, scholars must continue examining emerging narratives in community initiatives.

JOSÉ RICARDO MARTINS (Welcoming Spaces): Importance of governance/local government/mayors

In his presentation, Dr. Jose Ricardo Martins emphasised the value of local engagement and transformation, which is essential for successful revitalisation. “When citizens feel like agents of change, positive transformations occur,” he said but many top-down approaches (from external sources) have different effects.



Ricardo Martins talks about agency, sense of belonging and entrepreneurship among young people in Germany. Photo: Jofelle Tesorio/Welcoming Spaces

Martins cited a case in Altenburg, where Valentin, along with Nazim (a Syrian migrant), addressed the decline in young people in the region. They created a space (the FACKtory- die Zukunftsfabrik) for youth aged 11 to 29 to learn and focus on technology (e.g., 3D printing). According to him entrepreneurship and building relationships were key values.

He said that this is a rural evolution project that has funding from the German Ministry of Families and Youths. It aims to transform living places and neighborhoods.

For Martins, inclusion in the project is central; migrants from Syria and Afghanistan actively participate. The project fosters collaboration between locals, migrants, and refugees.

“They participate in transforming their local realities to make a better place to live and they were selected as both best projects and there are some others besides these teenagers here. But what struck me was they are so much involved in transforming their realities. So, this inclusion is the emplacement that the project is aiming for. So, when there is a chance, an opportunity for them, they take part,” Martins said.

In summary, local engagement, entrepreneurship, and inclusive initiatives contribute to positive community transformations.

JOFELLE TESORIO (Welcoming Spaces): Role of the media

Jofelle started his presentation saying media narratives significantly impact audience behavior and policy agendas. Findings show varying degrees of neutrality in representations of migrants and depopulating areas. Asylum seekers are often portrayed as a crisis or threat.

Jofelle Tesorio emphasises the media's role in influencing behaviours but also the importance of engaging with journalists to make the narratives more inclusive and fairer. Photo: Ester Driel/Welcoming Spaces

Therefore, according to here, engaging the media is important. “Researchers must make media accountable by engaging with them directly. Instead of just analysing media, involve them in projects,” she said, adding that unequal representation in newsrooms highlights the need for engagement.

One of the actions that can be done is building allies among the media and empower migrant voices. Some activist groups create their own media platforms (e.g., social media, newsrooms) to share their stories.

The presentation ended with a message that active engagement with the media and empowering marginalised voices can lead to more equitable narratives.

TANJA BASTIA - discussant

In her response, discussant Tanja Bastia, a professor at Manchester University, connected the presentations with her experiences and her own research.

“I have learned a lot and all the presentations are really sparking ideas, of things that I have been working on in the past. I am really hoping that you're going to take this forward. So I, I've just finished this large project that my next project and one of the things that we've really kind of worked on in the last few months is how all of us taking

this forward and I really do hope that you find a way of taking this forward because it's, it's really been a rich project," she said.

Discussant Tanja Bastia connects the presentations to her experiences and her own research on Bolivian migrants in Buenos Aires. Photo: Jofelle Tesorio/Welcoming Spaces

Prof. Bastia started with media engagement. She agreed that engaging with the media is crucial for translating research findings to a broader audience, and researchers should seek media training and actively participate in interviews to shift narratives effectively and building alliances with media practitioners and understanding their platforms can enhance communication.

On community collaboration, she reiterated the presenters' examples welcoming spaces where people come together highlights the importance of organic, community-driven initiatives.

She then connected the presentations on her project with Bolivian migrants living informal settlements in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where she observed the following:

- Different migrant organisations have varying narratives about migration.
- Nationality-based organisations often view migrants as guests, while grassroots groups focus on citizenship and belonging.
- Grassroots initiatives address housing and health services needs, involving both migrants and Argentinians.

Contemplating on the above, she investigated the temporal perspective among migrants. Initially, newly arrived migrants prioritise savings and consider returning home. After 8-10 years, they start thinking of the new place as home and engage in community organising.

And lastly, she picked on Ben van Essen's observation that connection between groups of people is made easier through music. Prof. Bastia said music serves as a powerful way for communities to come together. Beyond intellectual analysis, connecting with people's joy and experiences is essential. "There are diverse ways in which we can intellectualise about people coming together and analyse and spend time looking at interviews and focus groups and working with people. But I think then it is important also to find ways of connecting with how other people find joy in that joyful time and make space for that and connect with that in their lives."

FINAL PANEL

The final panel of the Welcoming Spaces conference aimed to discuss achieving spatial justice, contributing to the SDGs, setting the agenda for a 'whole society' approach, and inspiring policy coherence. The panel included:

- **Marina Royo de Blas**, EU Officer at DG AGRI, European Commission, focusing on the Rural Pact and long-term rural vision.
- **Jan Braat**, Senior Policy Advisor in Migration at Utrecht Municipality, involved with the Einstein initiative, Eurocities, and the International Alliance of Safe Harbours.
- **Huub Wilbrink**, Strategic adviser at COA, responsible for reception organisation and housing of asylum seekers in the Netherlands.
- **Ben van Essen**, Director of SBE, a network, comprising municipalities at the border region of the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, enhancing citizen participation in European policy.
- **Steffen Präger**, Managing Director of Plattform e.V., supporting empowerment and entrepreneurship of civil society organisations, based in Erfurt, Germany.
- **Tanja Bastia**, professor at the Global Development Institute at the University of Manchester.

(From left) Annelies Zoomers, Ben van Essen, Huub Wilbrink, Jan Braat and Steffen Präger, with Marina Royo de Blas joining online.

The panel was moderated by **Annelies Zoomers**, the project's Principal Investigator. The main topics discussed by each participant of the panel are:

Marina Royo de Blas presented the Rural Pact, an initiative by the European Commission to enhance cooperation among rural stakeholders, as well as the Long-term Vision for the EU's rural areas, highlighting the growing discontent due to the urban-rural divide. She referred to the 2024 study by the Committee of the Regions, "The Geography of the Discontent," and introduced the EU Rural Vision for 2040, which focused on creating stronger, connected, prosperous, and resilient rural areas. Ms. de Blas mentioned key challenges like depopulation and the absence of policies targeting rural migrants. Annelies added that it is beneficial to target everyone inclusively rather than focusing solely on migrants.

Jan Braat shared the success of the Plan Einstein initiative in Utrecht, which integrates migrants into the local community through housing, education, and employment opportunities. He emphasised that all activities for migrants are also inclusive for the entire neighborhood to prevent claims of preferential treatment. Language classes, dance sessions, and other activities were designed for everyone, contributing to the project's success, alongside EU funding. However, he noted challenges in scaling up the project, particularly in small towns.

Huub Wilbrink explained the challenges COA has faced in the past 2.5 years regarding the reception and housing of asylum seekers. The newly passed law is a game changer

for COA, as it obliges all municipalities to participate in reception efforts, provides a stable budget, and permits asylum seekers to work legally. Consequently, 50% of asylum seekers now have paid jobs. Employers are motivated to hire asylum seekers due to subsidies and language courses.

Ben van Essen presented his organisation and raised a question on how to advance the EU Long-Term Rural Vision at the local level, noting a gap in this area. The EU representative responded by stating that budget and support for local-level initiatives will depend on the next commission.

Steffen Präger emphasised that scaling up community projects is straightforward when they rely on volunteers. However, there is a significant shortage of personnel in the administration, which means that volunteers and temporary staff conduct most projects.

Tanja Bastia emphasised the significance of engaging communities directly and understanding their specific needs and contexts. She noted that municipalities in the EU tend to be more progressive on immigration issues compared to their national governments. In contrast, in Argentina, which is one of her field research areas, municipalities are quite conservative, while the national government has enacted one of the most progressive migrant laws worldwide.

Annelies Zoomers concluded the final panel of the conference by calling for greater visibility of our research and the need for more events like this one.

Main Takeaways and Policy Recommendation from the Final Panel

Strengthen Rural Development Policies: Implement and enhance policies that address the urban-rural divide, including implementation support and focusing on creating resilient and prosperous rural areas. Support initiatives that integrate rural migrants and address issues such as depopulation and lack of targeted policies.

Promote Inclusive Integration Programs: Develop and expand integration programs that include both migrants and local communities. Ensure that activities and resources benefit everyone to prevent perceptions of preferential treatment and improve social cohesion.

Support Legislative and Structural Changes: Advocate for and implement legal and structural reforms that facilitate the reception and employment of asylum seekers. Ensure stable funding and support for municipalities participating in reception efforts and provide incentives for employers to hire asylum seekers.

Enhance Local Implementation of EU Policies: Increase support and resources for local-level implementation of EU policies, such as the Long-Term Rural Vision. Address gaps in local policy advancement by ensuring adequate budget allocations and support from the EU Commission.

Address Volunteer and Administrative Needs: Recognise the reliance on volunteers for community projects and address the shortage of administrative personnel. Invest in the capacity building of local administrations to support and sustain community initiatives effectively in the long run to avoid the short-termism of community initiatives.

Intensify Direct Community Engagement: Foster direct engagement from the side of the project and local administration leaders with communities to better understand and address their specific needs and contexts. Promote policies that align with the progressive stance of local municipalities while considering and addressing the various levels of conservatism in different regions regarding migrants and asylum seekers.

Increase Visibility and Continuity of Research: Enhance the visibility of research findings and continue organising conferences and events that facilitate dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders, including policymakers. This will help maintain momentum and ensure that research informs policy and practice effectively.

We conclude that effective policy frameworks and governance structures are essential for the success of rural development and migration inclusion initiatives. Ensuring that policies are flexible and adaptable to local conditions can enhance their impact.

Some of the participants, speakers, and organisers after the final session of the Welcoming Spaces Conference at Janskerkhof in Utrecht. Photo: Dominique Schmid