



POLICY BRIEF

JANUARY 2021 #0

WELCOMING SPACES

Our mission is to find new ways to for revitalisation in shrinking regions in the European Union, while also offering welcoming spaces where non-EU migrants can pursue their life projects. Our H2020 programme runs for four years in five partner countries: Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain.

The Welcoming Spaces programme kicked off last year in March with a public event in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Now, a year later, we have gained the first insights on the types, spread and characteristics of welcoming spaces across Europe, as well as on the challenges and opportunities that local stakeholders experience concerning both welcoming initiatives for non-EU migrant newcomers and the revitalisation of shrinking regions. This policy brief presents our key insights from the field.

Research facts

Over the year, our initial data base has grown from 41 initiatives across the five partner countries to 81 initiatives spread across 46 localities in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain.

The start of the identified welcoming initiatives in shrinking regions varies and is country specific. 'Shrinkage' is a common issue in different countries – but what constitutes a shrinking region differs per country, depending on the national context. Scale of shrinkage in the Netherlands is for instance different from shrinkage in Italy or Spain. We see that a large number of initiatives in Germany, Poland and the Netherlands emerged in the years 2014 and 2015 and were motivated by solidarity, while many initiatives in Spain and Italy were already set up from 2008 onwards and were linked to revitalisation. Most initiatives are run by non-profit organisations with funding or in-kind

support from local or regional governments, however also for-profit and governmental initiatives are present. In addition to formal initiatives, we also found many informal connections or commercial ventures such as small grocery shops run by newcomers, serving as meeting places for both long-term residents and migrant newcomers.

The background of the non-EU migrants is diverse. It is linked to the country's geographical location in Europe, historical and cultural connections, as well as international migratory flows as a result of conflict and regional instability. Currently, many newcomers in Germany and the Netherlands are refugees from Syria and EU labour migrants from Central and Eastern Europe, the largest group newcomers in Poland comes from the neighbouring countries Belarus and Ukraine, Italy is a destination for many African migrants and migrants from Romania and Ukraine, and a large share of migrants in Spain comes from Latin America.

Key insights

In the past year, we have conducted a quick scan in all four partner countries: Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain. The following section consist of our key insights from this first phase of data collection in our project Welcoming Spaces.

1. Labels in policy making can be misleading. While both 'migrants' and 'shrinking regions' are often labelled as problematic, we found that initiatives in shrinking regions are often very innovative and contribute to revitalisation and migrant newcomers offer opportunities for local life in shrinking regions.

2. Local initiatives are often very innovative and contribute to revitalisation of shrinking regions.



POLICY BRIEF

JANUARY 2021 #0

- There are a series of transformative, wellbeing-oriented and green initiatives that smartly adapt to regional shrinkage.
- These initiatives are organised from bottom-up and often involve grassroots organisations, NGOs and/or faith-based charities which sometimes join forces with local and regional governments.
- These initiatives frequently face financial, organisational, and political hardships to scale-up and out. As a result, some thrive for some time and then fall. In Riace in Italy, for instance, political disputes changed a village from a thriving welcoming space that combated depopulation through immigration into a shrinking village.

3. Many initiatives for newcomers at local level are developed simultaneously to national or regional programmes for migrant newcomers and contribute to creating welcoming spaces in Europe.

- While national and regional programmes mostly focus on integration, citizenship and membership, local initiatives address to some extent the limitations of the national and regional programmes by taking into account the needs and characteristics of the local communities.
- Many initiatives aim to welcome newcomers but are at the same time tailored towards local needs of a municipality in a shrinking region, spanning from tourism, nature conservation, health care support, to keeping businesses running and skills training for locally demanding sectors such as agriculture.

4. Successful participation of migrant newcomers in local revitalisation seems to stand on the willingness and openness of both migrant newcomers to explore the locality and local groups with political, religious or social authority and recognition to welcome them.

- Municipalities in shrinking regions consider strengthening social cohesion, keeping the local character and stimulating a feeling of inclusion in their community important pillars for realising social wellbeing.
- Initiatives such as ‘Colourful het Hogeland’, in the Dutch province Groningen, for instance, set a positive tone by explicitly welcoming people ‘with roots abroad’ and stressing connections between people of different backgrounds.
- Newcomers who move to a shrinking region are often not only facilitated in their move from top-down but can also be attracted by their social networks, availability of low-cost housing and labour opportunities in certain sectors such as agriculture.

5. The COVID-19 pandemic has had implications for our research but also for the localities in the shrinking regions across Europe.

- Localities in shrinking regions were rediscovered as safe places. This has led to new mobilities from urbanised areas to rural areas, contributing to a reinterpretation of ‘shrinkage’.
- The pandemic highlighted the vulnerable position of many migrant newcomers.
- Labour migrants in all partner countries turned out to be front-line workforce amid the spread of the pandemic, working in low-skilled jobs in the agricultural sector, the meat industries and distribution centres where many COVID-19 infections were signalled.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For any questions or clarifications, please reach out to the author: **Bianca Szytniewski** | Email: b.b.szytniewski@uu.nl



POLICY BRIEF

JANUARY 2021 #0

Annex I: Summary of the quickscan

The focus of WP1 is on fact-finding and the development of a database of localities with examples of welcoming spaces in the five project countries: Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland and Spain. Based on our initial list of ‘shrinking’ localities/initiatives, we did a careful search of exemplary initiatives that welcome(d) non-EU migrants. Initiatives were selected according to the following criteria:

1. The localities are situated in a shrinking region. The definition of ‘shrinking regions’ in Europe differ but are generally “characterised by poor job opportunities, outmigration, a closing down of services, residential vacancy and urban decline [and] decreasing public budgets” (Küpper et al. 2018: 229-230).
2. The localities are geographically scattered within the five countries. In this way, we cover different shrinking regions per country with their own distinct local narratives and institutional settings.
3. There is a variety in driving forces to set up ‘welcoming’ initiatives. We distinguish between four different types of initiatives: (i) government-driven, (ii) business-driven, (iii) citizen/NGO driven and (iv) migrant-driven.

While all efforts were made, through a series of meetings in calibrating conceptualisation and methodologies, the five teams conducted their Quickscan exercises in slightly different ways that reflect the context specificity of each country in general and during the COVID lockdown period, in particular. Specifically, we have observed the different meanings and manifestations of shrinkage and welcoming practices, as well as the varying data availability of published and online data.

Germany

Country context

Germany has been affected by a demographic decline for a long time. Especially rural areas in Germany, are more likely to be affected by demographic change and population decline, than urbanised areas. Immigration may counteract the demographic decline and can be seen as a resource for shrinking, rural areas in Germany. Even though the net-migration is declining, around 327 thousands newcomers arrived in Germany in 2019. Moreover, every fourth person living in Germany has a migration background and since 2000 a variety of policies passed with regard to labour migration, asylum seekers, refugees and (Spät-)Aussiedler (former German emigrants that returned to Germany after World War II). Depending on the background of the newcomers, different (integration) programmes and policies are in place to assist newcomers in for instance accommodation or work related issues.

Different welcoming initiatives have been set up in various shrinking and rural areas in Germany, which aim social participation of newcomers. Both low-skilled jobs and the leisure sector are important domains for both newcomers to find and create opportunities to get ahead and participate in society on the one hand, and the local community as it concerns vital fields of actions for public and private actors on the other. A number of socially orientated agricultural initiatives were in found in Thüringen, for example the company Ökoherz e.V., that works with newcomers. These initiatives aim for not only sustainability in an environmental or ecological sense, but also in a social and economic sense. Newcomers have gal working contracts and pay social security.

Key insights Quickscan

- Welcoming initiatives are found in the public sector and the private sector and include both non-profit organisations and

for-profit corporations; for example, local social care services, non-statutory welfare associations, business, churches, and citizen and migrant volunteer grassroots associations;

- Some organisations are mixed in their goals and activities, such as a volunteering organisation that is organised by a local church or through a non-statutory welfare association;
- Different integration programmes for newcomers (especially youth integration programmes) are organised by welfare organisations from the private sector, which receive governmental funding;
- Work-related integration programmes are run both by mainly run by Non-statutory welfare associations (NPOs) or commercial associations (for-profit);
- Civic engagement was also found in two types of initiatives: citizen grassroot organisations, which are made up of volunteers who may or may not have a migration background; and migrant grassroot organisations, or migrant organisations, which includes members with a migrant background.

Activities planned in the near future

For 2021, we plan meetings to facilitate exchange on challenges and social inclusion practices between local policy makers, government actors, NGOs, migration organisations, volunteer initiatives and businesses. There will be a round table with our Community of Practice and additional meetings and interviews with practitioners in the field.

Italy

Country context

Italy could be considered a country of emigration until the second part of the 20th century. However, between the 1980s and the 1990s Italy

has started to receive large flows of migrants from different countries all over the world: from 1996 to 2019, the foreign resident population increased from roughly 738 thousand people to more than five million. In the same period that Italy transformed into an immigration country, a new geographical polarisation developed after four decades of intense economic development. Italy was composed of a multitude of urban centres characterised by social and economic dynamics, and by smaller and increasingly peripheral settlements. These areas are home to 23% of the Italian population, covering the 60% of national territory and about half of its almost 8,057 municipalities. Nevertheless, these areas are characterised by socio-economic marginalisation, population ageing and a lack of services and infrastructures.

In the last decades, migrants often found employment in shrinking regions, working mainly in agriculture and the care sector. However, they are mainly employed in low-skilled jobs while many immigrant workers are over-educated for the employment position. At the same time, these territories are mostly characterised by high unemployment, especially among young people and women, and suffer from limited mobility possibilities, which makes access to certain social, health, scholar and care services inefficient. Other reasons for moving to a shrinking region are migration networks and family reunification as well as a greater availability of low-cost housing. The presence of structures (SPRAR/SIPROIMI or CAS) linked to the reception system of asylum seekers and refugees is also contributing to this shift. Indeed, this system was widespread also in shrinking areas, where the structures, often together with local associations and bottom-up organisations, led to innovative welcoming initiatives.

Key insights Quickscan

- Most welcoming initiatives are linked to the reception system, and, in particular, to the

actions of associations and cooperatives to intervene in the shortcomings of the Italian reception system, by ensuring the right to housing and/or integration services such as language courses and job training.

- Many associations and cooperatives promote a model of widespread and small-scale secondary reception providing apartments for four to five people in villages and towns.
- The most successful initiatives seem to be those which are self-sustainable and depend less on public funds. In some cases, such initiatives even support local welfare systems, for instance Hotel Giardino in Breno, Brescia province.
- A first mapping of these welcoming initiatives shows a wide range of activities, such as organic and short chain agriculture, tourism, handcraft, and territorial valorisation.
- What emerged was a combination of projects which went beyond the mere reception of newcomers to become valuable also in terms of territorial valorisation, with a special focus on sustainability, such as ecotourism, organic food, circular economy and maintenance of natural environment.

The Netherlands

Country context

While the Netherlands has experienced and expects population growth in the next decades, there are regional differences. Especially peripheral, mostly rural areas have experienced population decline, caused by selective (out-) migration, ageing and de-greening, which can lead to issues such as reduced service level of emergency services and health care, decreasing number of pupils and school closure, disappearance of facilities with both service and social functions.

The share of people with migration background in the Netherlands is often much lower in rural shrinking areas than the national average, and similar to the national average in urban shrinking areas. The presence of migrant newcomers can contribute to chances and challenges for policy making and local society in shrinking areas.

Migrants living in shrinking areas are for a large part asylum seekers and recognised refugees who are assigned to asylum accommodations or social housing in municipalities all over the country by the national asylum authorities. The majority of recognised refugees seem to have a preference for settling in bigger cities but are often assigned housing in shrinking areas. Other migrant newcomers are (circular or temporary) labour migrants, mostly from EU countries working in the agricultural, food and building industry.

Key insights Quickscan:

- While shrinkage is on the national policy agenda in the Netherlands, the design and execution of policies on preventing (the negative consequences of) shrinkage depends on provincial and municipal governments.
- Some policy initiatives are growth oriented, aiming at attracting people through tourism and investment, others aim at gradually increasing liveability and social cohesion in the local community. Especially, citizen and civil society led initiatives play important roles in stimulating social cohesion and maintaining facilities in some areas.
- The spread of refugees across the Netherlands is mainly based on the population size of the Dutch municipalities, but there are also attempts to match the profiles of refugees with the employment and educational offer of regions.
- Municipalities are responsible for interpreting and executing the national civic integration policy aimed mainly at non-EU

migrants. This leads to local variation and involvement of various actors.

- There are numerous bottom-up initiatives in shrinking areas that are specifically aimed at the welcoming of migrant newcomers. They often simultaneously cater to migrants' needs and tackle issues related to shrinkage by providing essential services and fostering social cohesion.
- Welcoming initiatives are led by individual residents with and without migration background, from businesses, municipalities to civil society and religious organisations.

Activities planned in the near future

For 2021, we plan meetings to facilitate exchange on challenges and good practices between local policy makers, bottom-up initiatives and other governmental and non-governmental actors on migration and asylum.

Poland

Country context

In recent years Poland has shifted its position from a traditional emigration country to an immigration one in terms of the migratory balance. The fall of communism in 1989 impacted facilitation of departure procedures and has started a new era of migration in the history of the country. Since then, there have been two migratory stages determined by the political, social and economic developments within the country: A stage of moderate emigration induced by economic transformation (1989–2004), and a stage of post-accession migration to other EU countries after joining the European Union in 2004 (and Schengen area in 2007), with a rapid growth in the first years and slowing down since 2012.

Since 2016, the number of immigrants surpassed the numbers of emigrants. Since then, we have witnessed an increase in labour migration flows

to Poland. This new trend is a response to the economic growth of the Polish economy and the growing demand for workers. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown of sectors with a high rate of foreign employees (i.e. construction, gastronomy, tourism) may have slowed down this trend for a while, but it seems unlikely it could be reverted. Currently, the largest group of newcomers in Poland are Ukrainians who moved to Poland for work or study purposes. They are followed by Belarussians and citizens of other post-soviet countries (Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan). Among migrants from Russia, there is a large number of Chechens who received an international protection status (mainly subsidiary protection) in Poland. In addition, traditional immigration from Vietnam to Poland, commencing in the 1960s, continues. There is also an increasing inflow of workers from China, India and Nepal.

Key insights Quickscan

- In Poland, the relation between shrinking regions and migration is twofold. Poor job opportunities in shrinking regions (in particular in rural areas and some small and medium municipalities) lead to internal outmigration and population decline. At the same time, certain shrinking regions, e.g. Podlaskie and Lubelskie voivodships at the border with Ukraine and Belarus, attract immigrants from these neighbouring countries.
- Due to the location of reception centres for asylum seekers (six out of ten centres), shrinking regions in Lubelskie and Podlaskie voivodships also host many newcomers, either temporary for the duration of the asylum procedure or permanently if they decide to settle down in the region.
- In Poland, welcoming initiatives are mainly driven by non-governmental organisations (including NGOs established or run by migrants), although there are also some state-funded programmes and actions



POLICY BRIEF

JANUARY 2021 #0

(including the flagship Individual Integration Programme, IIP targeted at beneficiaries of international protection).

- One of the main goals of welcoming initiatives are actions to eliminate barriers that migrants encounter on the path of inclusion into the Polish society.

Activities planned in the near future

We aim to deepen the knowledge about heralds of the shrinking regions' transformation into a welcoming space for migrants. But are civil society's actions enough for the migrants' emplacement in their new country, new region and new locality? Our research will hopefully let us to find an answer for this question.

Spain

Country context

Spain, formerly a country of emigration, became from the mid 1990's a country of immigration, and this phenomenon intensified during the 21st century. The migratory policy developed by Spain could be defined as "a system that generates irregularity", as potential immigrants find scarce opportunities to obtain a work permit in their country of origin. As a result, people are forced to spend a period of time in a situation of irregular status, thereby feeding a submerged economy that demands cheap labour, a situation maintained in most cases up to three years', when under certain conditions options for residence and work permit become available. Spanish migratory policy in terms of asylum cannot be termed generous. The increased number of applications since 2014 has led to the collapse of public refugee assistance services and a situation of chaos in the reception system, which was taken over by social organisations together with other public administrations.

Migration management is a shared, decentralised responsibility held between various levels of public administration: state, autonomous

communities, and local authorities. Autonomous Communities subsidise reception and integration programmes run by local authorities or not-for-profit organisations. The local authorities assume responsibility for managing and providing assistance for foreigners (normally via the Social Services), and tertiary sector organisation receive funding for specific programmes. In rural areas local authorities tend to have very limited financial/technical resources, and the organisations are sparser than in urban areas.

The demographic issues in Spain have been recently incorporated into the public agenda. At a national level, in 2007, the Law of Sustainable Development for Rural Areas was approved, aiming to maintain and expand the economic base of the rural areas and to increase its population, and the Government Commission against the Demographic Challenge was created with the collaboration of the regions and local entities. Along the different territories various initiatives and policies are taking place such as planning strategies, regional legislation and so on, but their outcomes are still to be reviewed.

Key insights Quickscan

- The type of revitalisation strategy in Spanish shrinking regions is mostly economically growth-oriented, much more than wellbeing-oriented.
- Rural and urban labour markets face the same problems: unemployment and precarious work, especially among young people and migrants. Regional differences are large, but as a pattern, migrants are concentrated in few productive sectors and in the unskilled jobs.
- Investment flows to the chosen localities in shrinking regions are coming from the public sector; in some cases, a particular firm invests in the locality.
- Spanish population in general, and particularly in our localities in shrinking regions, is decreasing. From the 90's, natural



POLICY BRIEF

JANUARY 2021 #0

growth is falling. When the population grows, it is due to the migratory contribution.

- The rural Spain has a very low population density, ageing population and masculinised.
- There is a very low presence of asylum seekers, except for migrants from Venezuela.
- In general, and despite depopulation, there are good health/social education facilities in the villages.

Activities planned in the near future

The two upcoming events in Galicia will create an online space where practices/policies, visions and struggles can be shared between mayors from welcoming municipalities on the one hand and between relevant NGO's working on the integration/reception of migrants on the other.

Annex II: Summary of stakeholder events

Stakeholder events in the Netherlands, Poland and Spain to discuss the role of newcomers in shrinking regions

At the end of November and beginning of December a group of mayors in the Netherlands and Spain met online to share their experiences, including challenges and opportunities, with newcomers in their municipalities situated in shrinking regions. Also, in Poland, an event took place with NGO's to discuss welcoming initiatives that address migrants, in particular asylum seekers and refugees, and obstacles faced by organisations in carrying out their activities. These meetings were organised as part of our Community of practice.

In **the Netherlands**, two main topics stood out: labour migration as an important policy theme and the focus on newcomers in relation to liveability in the municipalities. This connects to the assumption within the Welcoming Spaces programme that successful revitalisation of shrinking regions is closely connected to economic viability, social wellbeing and political stability. Concerning labour migration, the participants noted the challenge between welcoming labour migrants to pursue economic growth on the one hand and providing sufficient housing and engaging labour migrants in daily life practices in the municipality on the other. With regards to liveability, maintaining social cohesion in the villages and stimulating participation between locals and newcomers were mentioned as important challenges. In addition to these challenges, the participants also saw opportunities in the settlement of newcomers in their municipalities, for instance for keeping schools and public services open, organising participation projects including sports or language exchanges, and finding ways to recognise the talents and experiences of the newcomers which can enrich the local



POLICY BRIEF

JANUARY 2021 #0

community. Concerning this last point, some municipalities find it difficult to keep newcomers in their municipality as shrinking regions often offer less labour and educational opportunities than urban regions. A challenge for shrinking regions is thus also found in becoming an attractive economic region.

In **Spain**, different topics were discussed among the participants, including the emplacement of (first generation) newcomers, the reluctance of some locals to receive newcomers and the opportunities newcomers can bring to shrinking regions. The mayors agreed that the “complete integration” of newcomers is reached only with second generation migrants as the first generation often have the idea of returning to their country of origin. The importance of newcomers in shrinking regions, often rural areas, in order to conserve liveability and the ‘village character’ is noted. The arrival of newcomers and successful integration of migrants – both EU and non-EU migrants or even Spanish migrants who relocate - is perceived of importance for conserving local liveability and the ‘village character. In Spain, in some cases, thanks to newcomers, public services such as schools and nurseries remain open. A challenge is found in keeping newcomers. In some cases, asylum seekers have already become part of the local community, when their asylum application is rejected and they are about to be expelled.

In **Poland**, the discussion was related to the concept of welcoming spaces and the challenges in implementation in Poland. The NGOs shared their experiences in carrying out programmes aimed at welcoming migrants and their inclusion in the Polish society. It turned out that the NGOs often replace the state in their activities in specific areas, such as education. While often undertaking innovative activities, like mediating in local conflicts, which can serve as a good practice for local governments both in Poland and abroad,

some municipalities cannot develop and implement new programmes as there is dependence on grant financing. Moreover, in recent years, the organisations/NGOs had to significantly limit their activities only to places with the greatest number of migrants (large cities), due to suspending the competition for the national Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) in 2015, a politicisation of grant competitions financed from the state budget (the so-called Civic Initiative Fund) and the current debate on EEA Funds. In addition, as a consequence of the political climate concerning migration and refugees since 2015, there has been a polarisation of social attitudes among locals. For this reason, local authorities seem to be afraid to raise the topic of local integration, and local communities began to be more hostile towards newcomers. Nevertheless, new policies are needed as the number of migrants in Poland, including small towns, is increasing.

Follow-up meetings with stakeholders will take place this upcoming year, including stakeholder events in Germany and Italy. Not only do we aim for developing the Community of practice further but also to exchange local, regional and national outcomes between stakeholders across countries and share best practices and lessons learned.