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# Social and Labor Integration of Asylum Seekers in Rural Mountain Areas—A Qualitative Study

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Migration into Europe affects the Alps in various ways. The recent influx of refugees and a higher number of asylum requests has presented governance challenges for mountain communities. In

Italy, the responsibility of regions to host asylum seekers increased when a national system was implemented to distribute asylum seekers throughout the country. This study explored the impact of current distributions through the analysis of 2 rural mountain municipalities in the northeast Italian Alps in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano (also known as South

Tyrol) in which reception facilities for asylum seekers have been established. A qualitative research approach offered empirical insights into the functioning of the reception system and governance in these communities. Our social network analysis of the research data, focusing on the labor integration of asylum seekers, indicated that stronger relational linkages among actors in rural mountain communities may facilitate access to the labor market for asylum applicants.

**Keywords:** Asylum seeker; labor integration; refugee; mountain area; social network analysis; South Tyrol; Italy.

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## Introduction

Ongoing refugee and migration movements are among the governance-related challenges of our time. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2016: 2), in 2015, about 65.3 million people fled conflicts, war, prosecution, and/or human rights violations. Only a comparably small share of these forcibly displaced people came to Europe—about 4.4 million refugees in 2015. In that year, “Europe witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of refugees and migrants arriving by the sea” (UNHCR 2016: 7). More than 1 million people entered the European Union from the Mediterranean Sea. The central Mediterranean route via Italy is one of the main routes to Europe, especially for African migrants. In 2015, about 153,800 people came across that route. One year later, the number had risen to 181,400 (UNHCR 2016, 2017c). Italy and Greece have Europe’s highest inflow of irregular migrants, some of whom are in transit to central or northern European countries while others are willing to stay in the country of arrival.

Because of these growing numbers, Italy decided to ease the burden on migrant destinations in the southern part of the country and to pursue a more balanced distribution of asylum seekers within its territory (Italian Ministry of the Interior 2017). By means of a national distribution formula, based on each province’s portion of the country’s total population, the applicants were distributed nationally through a decentralized reception

structure. Under the new system, rural regions that had been of little interest to migrants and had barely been affected by the migrant crisis—including remote areas in the Italian Alps that have experienced depopulation (Membretti and Dematteis 2016)—have begun to host migrants and asylum seekers and thus confront issues relating to migration, integration, and inclusion.

This study explored the experiences of 2 rural communities in the Italian Alps (in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, also known as South Tyrol) to which asylum seekers have recently been assigned. It focused on labor integration, which is an essential factor in personal autonomy and independence (Konle-Seidl and Bolits 2016). Because most refugees are likely to stay in the host country for a long time (Worbs and Bund 2016), early access to the labor market, including during the process of application for asylum, can be crucial. We sought to understand how these communities are dealing with the new situation and how they organize the labor integration process for the newcomers.

## Theoretical background

This investigation focused on international migrants with a low degree of voluntariness to migrate who are seeking asylum. We use the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s definition of asylum seeker as a person who “move[s] across borders in search of protection” and “has applied for protection as a refugee

and is awaiting the determination of his or her status” (UNESCO 2017). Asylum seekers can therefore become refugees with a protected status. This definition is in turn based on the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, which defines the criteria to qualify for protection, the rights of the displaced, and the legal obligations of the receiving countries (Hillmann 2016). The definition focuses on “the protection of persons from political or other forms of persecution” (UNHCR 2017a). Italy ratified the 1951 Convention, but only after many years. Through the so-called Martelli Act in 1990 (Gazzetta ufficiale 2017), the first specific regulations regarding asylum procedures and the reception of third-country nationals and stateless people emerged (UNHCR 2017b). According to Petrovic (2013), the Italian state has issued many decrees in recent years, but mostly as a reaction to emergencies or to increasing European pressure. Italy still has no comprehensive asylum policy.

Italy’s distribution of asylum seekers was intended to prevent urban concentrations. In contrast to urban areas, mountain and rural areas are often interpreted as places where time and development seem to be slower. Members of communities in such areas often know one another, share experiences, and live together in a limited territorial space, which promotes a certain type of solidarity and identity (Sørensen 2016). Because of their poor accessibility, mountain areas are also characterized by small villages with a specific social structure, which makes integration and migration processes different from those in urban areas (Löffler et al 2016; Membretti and Dematteis 2016). Haller (2016) assumes that the social structure and mentality of the Alpine region differ from those of other regions for 3 reasons: the importance of agriculture and strength of people’s attachment to the soil and to tradition, the economic structure (less accessibility and the predominance of small and medium-size enterprises in the artisanal, tourism, and service sectors), and the establishment of political autonomy.

Sørensen (2016: 392) argued that social capital is different in rural and urban contexts, with bonding social capital higher in rural areas, because of “localized trust, [the] rate of passive and active participation in local civic associations, and...local reciprocity.” Social capital can be seen as the actual or potential resources arising from a network of relationships at either the personal level (Bourdieu 2012) or the collective level (Putnam et al 1994). It can promote bonding within a group, as well as bridging from one group to another (Putnam 2001). By considering integration a long-term process, smaller villages may therefore offer more possibilities for new population groups, where networks and cooperation among actors (associations and organizations inside and outside the village) are crucial for the integration of asylum seekers. Social interrelations and networks in a small, defined space could be easier to manage and could consequently encourage contact between the newcomers and the receiving society. Refugees and asylum seekers, in contrast

to other foreign migrants who can choose where to settle, rarely know anyone in their new community (Cheung and Phillimore 2013: 10) and must rely on its receptiveness. Research has shown that social capital and social networks can have a positive effect on the integration of migrants and on labor integration in particular (Portes 1995; Chou and Chow 2009: 341; Cheung and Phillimore 2013; Moroşanu 2016).

By assigning asylum seekers to smaller communities and rural mountain areas with denser social networks, it may be possible to manage integration more easily and in a more targeted way. However, this could involve governance challenges because of the different institutional levels involved (Benz 2007; Wald and Jansen 2007). We investigated, in the 2 study areas, the influence of social networks and of individual and organizational actors on the labor integration of the asylum seekers living in the established reception centers. Our primary research question was: How do social relations and the governance of labor integration influence asylum seekers’ access to the (local) labor market?

## Methods

### Choice of study area

We selected 2 communities in the northeast Italian Alps in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, also known as South Tyrol, for our case studies. We selected South Tyrol because of its autonomous status as an Italian province and its opportunities to shape the process of integration through different strategies. South Tyrol is an example of local autonomy in the European context. Its autonomy is anchored in an international treaty, the Degasperi-Gruber Pact of 1946, and in the Italian Constitution; this status was revised in 1972.

This province qualifies as a predominantly rural area under both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) rural-urban typology (Eurostat 2017) and Italian Law 991/1952, which classifies all South Tyrolian municipalities as mountain areas (ISTAT 2015). The province’s autonomous status gives it legislative competence to offer a range of integration strategies. The region established an integration act in 2011 and new guidelines for integration policies in 2016, which among other things, define the role of municipalities (Mitterhofer et al 2016). National and regional regulations also provide a scope for municipalities to contribute to the integration of new arrivals.

South Tyrol is required to accommodate at least 0.9% of the people who are searching for protection in Italy. Applicants are first registered in the provincial capital and then accommodated in a reception facility within the province; these are considered their first and second receptions (APB-ST and Eurac Research 2017). The numbers of asylum seekers in South Tyrol increased from 137 in 2012 to about 1700 in 2017 (APB-ST 2012; APB-ST

**TABLE 1** General characteristics of the case-study villages. (Source: ISTAT 2017)

Demographics	CS1	CS2
Population in 2015	>5000	<5000
Non-Italian citizens	6.1%	8.1%
Non-EU citizens	2.6%	5.7%
Natural population growth	Positive	Negative
Net immigration	Balanced	Positive
Dominant economic sectors in 2011 <sup>a)</sup>		
Manufacturing	8.1%	29.2%
Construction	13.5%	6.3%
Wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	18.0%	19.0%
Accommodation and food service	24.3%	29.2%
No. of farmers in 2010 <sup>b)</sup>	>350	<60

<sup>a)</sup> Italian Census of Employment 2011.

<sup>b)</sup> Agricultural Census 2010.

2017). This increase led to the creation of new reception centers in rural mountain areas.

The 2 case-study communities were selected based on (1) their status as rural mountain communities under Italian and OECD standards, (2) a high share of people working in tourism and agriculture (ISTAT 2017), (3) their level of experience with reception facilities and asylum seekers, and (4) a higher (or lower) number of asylum applicants hosted in comparison to the number within South Tyrolian rural reception facilities. Both communities are more than 30 km from the closest urban center and are situated about 1000 m above sea level.

### Data gathering and analysis

The data were anonymized, and the communities (Table 1) are referred to here as case study (CS) 1 and 2. We used a mix of methods to capture the complexity of the topic (Bohnsack et al 2006; Flick 2008), using a participatory approach (Gerring 2007; Bergold and Thomas 2012) for data collection within the scope of a project, with both municipalities aiming to identify the communities' specific needs for increasing support for helping asylum seekers to enter the labor market. The mix of methods made it possible to consider different aspects of the research target during an observation period of about 1 year and provided additional insights. We conducted 5 semistructured key-informant interviews regarding the reception of asylum seekers at the local level, documented face-to-face interactions and project meetings between researchers and municipal actors, and collected demographic data on the asylum seekers from the

reception centers, as well as secondary data from the regional statistical institute (ASTAT 2017).

Central actors or groups of actors and their relationships were analyzed using interpretive and exploratory techniques. The qualitative data (interviews, protocols, field notes, and verbal remarks) allowed conclusions to be drawn regarding the context of action, linkages of meaning, and shared references (Hollstein 2010; Fuhse 2016). Subsequently, a network matrix was created to conduct a social network analysis of the local governance structure (Benz et al 2007).

The special feature of network analysis is that it is based on relational data (ie on different relationships [ties] among actors or groups of actors [nodes] and to a lesser extent on the actors' characteristics). The network is measured through the relationships and dynamics between 2 actors (dyads), 3 actors (triads), cliques, or groups (Wasserman and Faust 1994; Jansen 2006). These analyses gave us additional insight into the relations among key actors and groups of actors, because it is based on the principle of interdependency (Rank 2015), meaning that there exists a kind of reciprocity and exchange, as well as indirect connections, among the related actors. Using this technique, we focused on relations among actors at the different governance levels of each village.

We used UCINET software (Borgatti et al 2013) for analysis and NetDraw for visualization (Borgatti 2002). One way to assess networks is based on their density, which is measured as the existing number of ties divided by the total number of all possible network ties and ranges between 0 (no relationships) and 1 (maximum possible relationships). Another important parameter is centrality, which can be measured in different ways. We focused on 2 measures: (1) the average degree, which is the average number of relations that each node (actor) has with other actors of the network, and (2) the betweenness centrality, which is based on the number of shortest paths that one actor has to get to another actor (direct and indirect relations); betweenness centrality measures broker positions within the network (Jansen 2006; Fuhse 2016).

### Two South Tyrolian mountain villages in comparison

In 2015 and 2016, both municipalities opened reception facilities for asylum seekers. Since autumn 2015, CS1's reception center has been hosting 50 people, and since the beginning of 2016, 25 asylum applicants have been living in CS2. Facility records indicate that, as of April 2017, of these 75 asylum seekers, only a few had received a final decision on their applications for protection (19 had been granted a protected status, 14 were still awaiting a decision, and 42 were appealing a decision); nobody had left the facilities. According to facility records, residents were mostly (82%) male; almost 60% were younger than 26 (5% were unaccompanied minors), and 97% were from

**TABLE 2** Work experience gained by asylum seekers during their application process.<sup>a)</sup>

	CS1	CS2
<b>Statistics</b>	In April 2017, of 50 asylum seekers, 43 had gained work experience during their stay and 19 were working.	In March 2017, of 25 asylum seekers, 24 had gained work experience during their stay (no information provided for current working status).
<b>Main work areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agriculture (seasonal harvester, gardener)</li> <li>• Crafts (carpenter, welder)</li> <li>• Industry (factory worker)</li> <li>• Tourism (kitchen assistant, cleaner, barkeeper)</li> <li>• Voluntary work for the municipality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agriculture (seasonal harvester, gardener)</li> <li>• Social services (babysitter, companionship for disabled people)</li> <li>• Tourism (kitchen assistant, cleaner, dishwasher, receptionist)</li> <li>• Voluntary work for the municipality and a retirement home</li> </ul>

<sup>a)</sup> Data sources are the respective reception centers.

sub-Saharan Africa, with English or French as their main language. Residents had a limited education (average number of school years was estimated at 6 years for CS1 and 2 years for CS2), and their prior work experience was mainly in agriculture and crafts.

The 2 study communities had various differences and similarities. First, having or not having prior experiences with past reception facilities and asylum seekers leads to the assumption that they may be enriching for the local community. CS1 has had such experiences since the 1990s, when it hosted hundreds of asylum seekers from the former Yugoslavia, whereas this was CS2's first such experience. The 2 host communities had different reactions to the experience. For CS1, it was a chance to develop further knowledge and experiences. The community followed an open communication strategy, backed by a high level of residents' trust in the experienced people in charge. A social adviser said, "The experience in the 1990s showed that this challenge can be mastered.... The community trusts us." A reception center coordinator said, "There was a huge receptiveness among the population. The whole region is open-minded and receptive." In contrast, the establishment of the reception center in CS2 led to severe polarization, with mistrust exacerbated because of provincial authorities' lack of consultation with the local community. An integration adviser said, "There were big differences within the population, positive and negative reactions; especially some small right-wing extremist groups were against it." But, the mayor said, "overall the reception was a positive experience, the community is more open-minded than before."

In both communities, long-term volunteers (37 in CS1 and 20 in CS2) assisted the local authorities and the assigned nongovernmental organization (NGO) in welcoming the asylum seekers and providing basic services. In addition to cultural and informational events, they offered free literacy and language courses in German and Italian as a supplement to the courses offered by the Autonomous Province of Bolzano. They were also among the first local contacts for the asylum seekers and thus served as a bridge to the community. The asylum seekers also did volunteer work in both communities. At first, it was difficult for them to forgo remuneration, but in the

end, they were able to gain their initial work experience in the host country and demonstrate that "they are hardworking...and...able to work" (social adviser, CS1). It was important for the 2 highly interconnected communities to get to know the new residents personally.

The 2 study villages faced similar problems with employment—for example, seasonal job offers in agriculture and tourism were predominant, mostly because for "short-term work there are fewer barriers for the employers to hire asylum seekers" (center coordinator, CS2). Another barrier to hiring asylum seekers were the legally required courses for work safety, which are obligatory in Italy and are normally paid by the employer. To lower employers' hiring costs and thus increase asylum seekers' chances of getting a job, the NGO offered these courses to the asylum seekers.

Most job opportunities for asylum seekers were identified by the volunteers or through direct connections among other key local actors, such as the social advisers' ties to local enterprises: "They found jobs most of all through the volunteers. Without them we wouldn't be in such good position as we are now" (social adviser, CS1). This shows the importance of personal ties within the rural communities. Table 2 summarizes asylum applicants' work experiences, both paid and volunteer.

Focusing on the labor integration of the present asylum seekers, we identified 17 actors or groups of actors in CS1 and 18 in CS2, working at 3 administrative levels: municipal, intermunicipal, and provincial (Table 3). Each actor can be considered a node in a network of social relations relevant to employment. In both networks (Figures 1 and 2), the collaboration between the municipality and the reception center was crucial. The key actors work at the municipal level; they include the reception center coordinator and the people responsible for social affairs (mayor and social adviser and/or integration adviser). Center coordinators oversee the administrative affairs of each center resident. Within the network, they play a central role and are connected to almost all other actors. The second most important person is the social adviser of each municipality. In CS1, these 2 figures connect all other actors. In CS2, there are more municipal actors involved—a social adviser, an

TABLE 3 Key actors in the case-study networks.

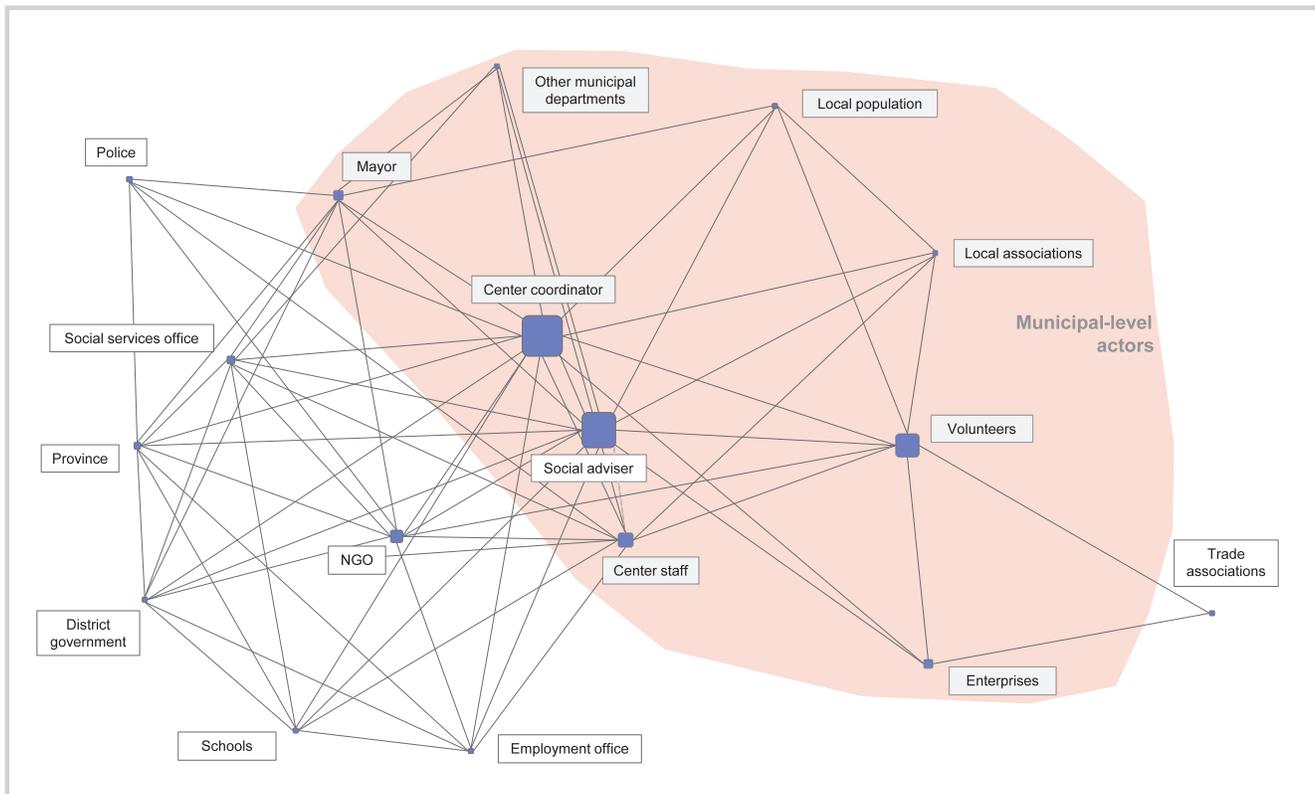
Actor	Institutional level	Comments
Autonomous Province of Bolzano	Provincial	Responsible for assigning asylum seekers to reception facilities
Police	Provincial	
NGO	Provincial	Responsible for the first and second receptions at the provincial level; commissioned by the provincial government
Social services office	Intermunicipal	
Employment office	Intermunicipal	Local offices commissioned by the provincial department of labor
Schools	Intermunicipal	
District government	Intermunicipal	Provides centralized services for a group of municipalities
Trade associations	Intermunicipal	
Enterprises	Municipal, intermunicipal	Potential and actual employers of asylum seekers
Social adviser	Municipal	Responsible for health, housing, the elderly, education and integration; sits on the municipal council; collaborates with the reception center; communicates with the local population
Integration adviser	Municipal	Responsible for integration; sits on the municipal council; collaborates with the reception center; communicates with the local population (CS2 only)
Mayor	Municipal	Communicates with the local population
Other municipal departments	Municipal	
Center coordinator	Municipal	Responsible for the reception facility; employee of the commissioned NGO; collaborates with key municipal actors
Center staff	Municipal	Employees of the commissioned NGO
Volunteers	Municipal	Help search for jobs for the asylum seekers; offer language courses
Local population	Municipal	
Local associations	Municipal	Support the job search

integration adviser, and the mayor—which means a more balanced distribution of responsibilities. In contrast, the social adviser in CS1 has both a high number of ties and an overload of responsibilities. Furthermore, these key actors emphasized a lack of transparency and information sharing among the different institutional levels, which demonstrates the difficulties of multilevel governance.

The CS1 network had 66 ties, and the CS2 network had 73 ties. Ties between individuals can be of different intensity and have different objectives. Granovetter (1973) differentiated between weak ties and strong ties that are central to the concept of social capital and embeddedness in a community. Individuals act based not only on their preferences, motivations, and rational choices but also on their embeddedness in a social system, which has institutional rules, norms, and relations and is influenced by dominance, both at the individual level (relational embeddedness) and at the structural level (structural embeddedness).

Both study communities had a density value of 1. The denser a network, the higher the level of social control within it, which also means a high presence of trust-based relationships and risk minimization (Wasserman and Faust 1994; Jansen 2006, 2007; Rank 2015). The average degree of centrality of the nodes was 3.88 for the CS1 network and 4.06 for CS2. Both study villages had a dense network characterized mostly by strong ties, which is characteristic of small mountain villages in general. This could be an advantage for integration in general, as well as in the job market. As the mayor of village CS2 said, “Within this rural context it is easier to integrate the people. It is an advantage, because it’s easy to get in touch with the local community.” The CS2 center coordinator said, “Small structures are ideal. Here you have a direct contact with the population and volunteers. You have more possibilities to find work.” Nevertheless, there is also high social control, and newcomers have to deal with high expectations from the receiving society that they will maintain cultural and social norms: “They greet, are kind,

FIGURE 1 Network analysis of the first case-study village. Node size represents betweenness centrality.



and shake hands” (integration adviser, CS2); “by doing voluntary work in the municipality, people see that they are able to work” (social adviser, CS1). Moreover, the asylum seekers in the reception centers are highly dependent on the local community and the engagement of individuals. In both cases, community institutions play an important role for the asylum seekers as bridges between them and the local community. As the CS1 center coordinator said, “In our small community it is [also easier] for the locals. They don’t see a critical and undefined mass of refugees; they see human beings.” The contact with local residents was additionally supported by volunteers. Besides providing free services for asylum seekers that supplemented state services, volunteers serve as mediators between the newly arrived and the local people and enterprises, including potential employers. This requires good collaboration among the different actors serving the migrants.

### The importance of social capital for asylum seekers

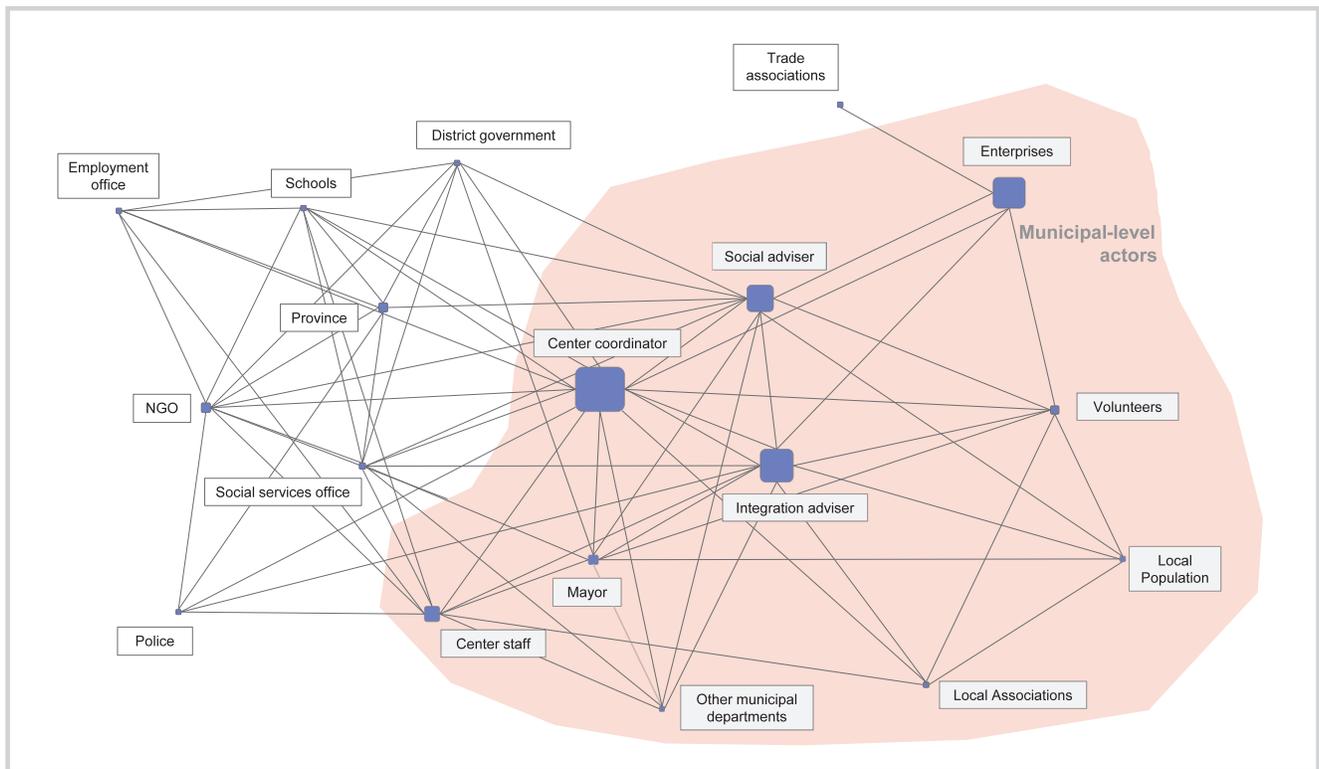
The establishment of reception facilities in the 2 study villages can be considered an example of integration of asylum seekers in small mountain villages. This had a positive impact on their labor integration and the integration process as a whole. The people who got asylum status already had a job or work experience and could take advantage of the strong relationships within their

new community. The results also show that prior experiences and familiarity with the migration phenomenon, as well as acceptance of the local community, may facilitate the integration process for the new inhabitants. These findings depend strongly on the trust a local community has in the person or people responsible—in CS1, this is the social adviser, who has had this position since the 1990s.

The social capital of the central actors in the networks (an individual good) was an added value for the people within the centers. Besides the negative element of higher social control because of the spatial (and social) proximity and the lack of anonymity, we found that strong ties could support integration and facilitate access to the labor market. They seem indispensable for getting a job, which is illustrated by the statement of the integration adviser in CS2: “You give your personal warranty.” Stronger relationships and trust within rural communities may facilitate integration during asylum seekers’ application process and enhance local social embeddedness, with volunteers making a significant difference in this regard.

Social capital can play a positive role in the acquisition of other forms of capital (Palloni et al 2001) and for the integration process in general. The 2 case studies presented here demonstrate that integration is multidimensional, connects different governance levels, and is a long-term project. Nonetheless, full access to the labor market during the application process helped some

FIGURE 2 Network analysis of the second case-study village. Node size represents betweenness centrality.



applicants who were later formally recognized as refugees to overcome barriers. The competences newly acquired through language and training courses, working experiences, and embeddedness in the community during that time was crucial. Without a strong local network bridging local institutions and the community, the integration of the new arrivals would have been more difficult. First results led to the assumption that relations with volunteers and the local population (social networks) in particular helped the asylum seekers to enter the labor market. This aspect needs further investigation. In this case, the bonding social capital of the rural community had a positive influence on the occupational status of the asylum seekers. In addition, the low numbers of asylum seekers made it easier for local residents to experience the integration process in a positive way and thus increased their acceptance of the newcomers.

According to the center coordinators, asylum seekers whose applications were approved wanted to stay in the

area, especially if they had a job, although new problems may arise in the long term, for example, with finding housing. Short-term and emergency strategies play a predominant role in Italy's migrant policy. The early investments in a sustainable and positive integration process may help to reduce problems that might arise after an asylum application is accepted. However, this would require a paradigm shift in integration policy and a different attitude regarding immigration and diversity, namely, one of openness and intercultural competence that "facilitates learning and change processes from and among different people, ways of life and forms of organization, thus removing barriers to access and delimitation mechanisms in the organizations" (Schröer 2015: 10). Multicultural relations are probably more effective if integration is given top priority in public administration and leading actors (Aumüller and Gesemann 2014: 171), which also requires recognition of the central role of local actors.

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