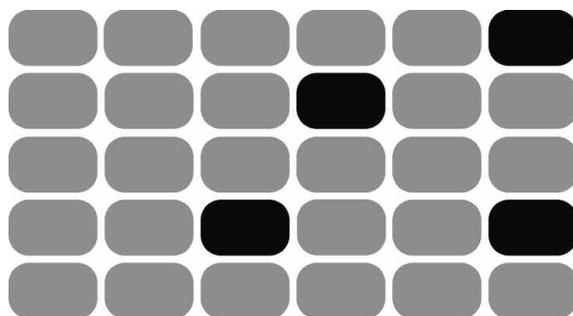


*Here and elsewhere: multi-cited  
destinations and refugee place-making  
in rural and peri-urban Portugal*



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***Here and elsewhere: multi-cited destinations and refugee place-making in rural and peri-urban Portugal***

*Highlights:*

1. Rural and peri-urban locations pose specific challenges and opportunities to refugee reception systems.
2. Difficulties accessing employment and services co-exist with lower living costs and closer community relations.
3. Understanding refugee settlement and belonging implies avoiding the pitfalls of methodological ruralism.
4. Refugees' translocal relations and imaginings of other locations influence their reception experience.
5. Besides policies, the territorial configurations and interpersonal relations are central in refugees' place making.

*Abstract:* Many countries receiving refugees have adopted a dispersed reception system. We examine the experiences of settling refugees in rural and peri-urban areas (north and centre of Portugal), using multiple case studies supported by the ethnographic method and semi-structured interviews. The main purpose of our analysis is to understand the complex intersections between the refugees' ambivalent subjectivities and the specific characteristics of these locations as a determinant factor in their connection and attitude towards place. To this end, we illustrate how their subjectivities are associated to imaginaries of other places (in and outside of Portugal) and how they build such imaginaries through digital networks. Understanding the significance of these digital connections implies avoiding the pitfalls of what we call *methodological ruralism*.

*Keywords:* Refugee settlement; belonging; mobility; digital networks, ethnography.

***Aquí y lejos de aquí: destinos multi-citados y place-making entre refugiados de contextos rurales y peri-urbanos portugueses***

*Ideas clave:*

1. Las ubicaciones rurales y periurbanas plantean retos y oportunidades a la acogida de refugiados.
2. Dificultades (empleo, servicios públicos) coexisten con menores costes de vida y mayor proximidad comunitaria.
3. Entender el asentamiento y la pertenencia de los refugiados implica superar el ruralismo metodológico.
4. Las relaciones e imaginaciones translocales de los refugiados influyen en su experiencia de acogida.

5. Además de las políticas, los territorios y las interacciones son fundamentales en la construcción del lugar de los refugiados.

*Resumen:* Muchos países que reciben refugiados han adoptado un sistema de recepción disperso. Examinamos las experiencias de asentamiento de refugiados en áreas rurales y periurbanas (norte y centro de Portugal), recorriendo a estudios de casos múltiples suportados por el método etnográfico y entrevistas semiestructuradas. El objetivo principal es comprender las complejas intersecciones entre las subjetividades ambivalentes de los refugiados y las características específicas de los territorios de acogida como factor determinante en su conexión y actitud hacia el lugar. Ilustramos cómo sus subjetividades se asocian a imaginarios de otros lugares, dentro y fuera de Portugal, y como construyen estas imágenes a través de espacios sociales digitales. Comprender el significado de estas conexiones digitales implica evitar los escollos de lo que llamamos *ruralismo metodológico*.

*Palabras clave:* Asentamiento de refugiados; pertenencia; movilidad; redes digitales; etnografía.

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## 1. *Introduction*

The enormous ongoing humanitarian challenge posed by forced migration across the globe due to unstable governments, climate change, unequal development and political repression (Hyndman & Giles, 2017) has been met with fragmented and paradoxical responses from countries in the Global North. Oscillating between compassion and repression and failing to keep their international commitments with regard to upholding asylum rights (Fassin, 2015), they have produced a "refugee crisis" (Sacramento et al., 2020), further accentuated by the policies of geographical dispersal which send refugees to areas that are under privileged and under financed (Darling, 2016), most of which are rural and peri-urban. These refugee hosting locations pose challenges which have received relatively little attention in the scholarly literature on Portugal, given that they are an emerging phenomenon which began with the implementation of a geographical dispersed reception system of refugees in the wake of the 2015 "refugee crisis"<sup>1</sup>. Even less attention has been given to the multiscale translocal dimensions of refugees' lives: the role of digital media networks in

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1• In Portugal, once a request for asylum is admitted, asylum seekers enjoy the same rights as refugees who have been granted status. Since there are no large reception centres for asylum seekers, they are all subject to the same geographical dispersal policy as refugees.

maintaining long distance bonds of affection with relatives and friends; the consequent emerging of a sense of community, a perspective of place attachment, home imaginations and notions and feelings of (not) belonging (Ager & Strang, 2008; Leurs, 2019; Alinejad & Ponzanesi, 2020).

Research on refugee hospitality in rural contexts in other European countries has focused predominantly on issues related to housing, employment, entrepreneurship, bodily and sensory experiences, interaction with local inhabitants and the impact of their presence on host communities (Ledstrup & Larsen, 2018; Weidinger & Kordel, 2020; Barth & Zalkat, 2021; Glorius et al., 2021; Herslund & Paulgaard, 2021; Papadopoulos & Fratsea, 2021). Refugees' everyday translocal connections and how they provide coordinates for their place-making is a dimension of analysis that needs further research. Therefore, in our analysis of the Portuguese case, the aim is to adopt a relational perspective to understand how migrants' national and international relations and imaginings of other locations, influenced and constructed through digital spaces (Challinor, 2012), impact upon refugees' experience of living in the specific geographical locations they are assigned to through the government reception system.

We examine how the intersections between the local characteristics of these settings, the practices of their state and voluntary services and refugee subjectivities impact in different ways upon refugee integration processes and their sense of belonging. We illustrate how structural constraints and shortcomings in service delivery combine with creative responses at the local level and how these intersections are experienced by refugees in relation to their own aspirations, imaginings and biographic trajectories. We discuss how their sense of place and belonging develops through their everyday experiences which include participation in national and transnational social networks that provide information, support and some solace. We show how refugees draw on these networks to *cite* each other's accounts of their hosting conditions – hence the title – and how this affects their attitude to place.

This in turn illustrates the importance of qualifying the assertion that *place matters* (Platts-Fowler & Robinson, 2015, p. 476) by highlighting the impact of translocal and transnational relations upon refugees' imagined geographies of anxiety, belonging and desire as they project themselves beyond the physical borders of their hosting locations. Although the politics and the intimacies of belonging are intertwined (Antonsich, 2010), the affective dimensions of (re)settlement are easily overlooked when the emphasis is placed on civic belonging related to legal status. As Fozdar and Hartley (2013, p. 130) point out, "unlike the native born, who are both existentially and emotionally *within* the nation-state to which they belong, migrants may be in one place, but *long* for another".

## 2. The roots and routes of refugees' expectations and belongings

Up until the mid-1990s, refugee reception occurred almost exclusively in metropolitan areas, based on the dominant policy idea that the city offered the most appropriate context for the provision of services, employment opportunities and socio-cultural support amongst refugees (McDonald-Wilmsen et al., 2009; Mungai, 2013). However, in many cases, the result was an arguably excessive spatial concentration in degraded and marginalized urban areas (Gilhooly & Lee, 2017). Efforts to correct this situation were based on the policy of geographical dispersal, namely in main destination countries of forced migration, such as Australia, Canada, the USA and some European nations. Inevitably, smaller towns and rural settings turned into the new settlement spots (Zorlu, 2017; Bock, 2018; Proietti & Veneri, 2019; Sacramento et al., 2019; Weidinger & Kordel, 2020). Wernesjö (2015, p. 452) states that rural areas have been described as both "backwards" and "idyllic with access to nature and closely knit social networks, in contrast to the autonomy and stress of urban life".

Portugal presents a paradigmatic case of these trends of decentralization. Between 1974 and 2014, the country received 1,605 refugees, who were settled mainly in the Lisbon area (Sousa & Costa, 2016). From 2015 onwards, numbers began to increase. By 2017 Portugal had received a total of 1,520 individuals through the EU's Relocation Programme alone (Alto Comissariado para as Migrações, 2017). In 2019, Portugal accepted 2,210 international protection claimants and refugees, of which 376 pertained to refugees received under the National Reinstallation Programme (Oliveira, 2020). This rise prompted the dispersal of asylum seekers and refugees through 98 of Portugal's 278 municipalities (Alto Comissariado para as Migrações, 2017), covering every district, including low density inland regions<sup>2</sup> that face greater demographic decline.

The dispersal of refugees is often envisaged by government entities as an opportunity for repopulating and revitalising peripheral areas deemed as *declining*

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2• Low density areas are "characterised by sparse human settlements – below or well below the EU average [...] [whose] population density levels [...] do not allow their economies to thrive" (Bisaschi et al., 2021, p. 35).

territories (Bloem, 2014; Pollermann, 2016; Membretti & Lucchini, 2020). In contrast, the biographic trajectories and subjective preferences of refugees are often ignored. As a consequence, territorial dispersal, particularly in rural areas, can pose limitations to refugees' autonomy and freedom (De Genova et al., 2018), while creating additional challenges to the integration and the upholding of their rights (Sacramento & Silva, 2018; Silva & Sacramento, 2020). The socio-economic, cultural and geo-physical characteristics of a location are highly relevant in refugee processes of place-making and belonging (Brun, 2001; Sampson & Gifford, 2010). Even when asylum rights are clearly acknowledged in legal frameworks, the particularities of the geographic context may become a decisive force when it comes to ensuring that those very same rights are upheld.

The characteristics of rural settings in the Global North often produce substantial challenges resulting, mostly, from ageing, scarce productive diversification, greater exposure to national and international economic variations, labour precariousness, unemployment, seasonal activities, lower income, difficulties in acceding to market goods and, above all, to public services (Jentsch, 2007; Mungai, 2013; Schech, 2014; Shucksmith & Brown, 2016; Weidinger & Kordel, 2020). Further challenges may include the absence of infrastructures, specialized competences, public services and specific integration mechanisms for migrants which pose obstacles to the creation of effective social responses (Bock, 2018; Haugen, 2019; Whyte et al., 2019). Local services constitute the "core domains of integration", namely, facilitating access to employment, housing, education and health (Ager & Strang 2008, p. 170). Nonetheless, rural areas may also offer attractive attributes to refugees. These include lower living costs, safety, tranquillity and greater proximity between social, political and public services institutions. As local officials and practitioners in the tertiary sector live closer to the population in the locales where they work, this may facilitate the mobilization of local resources and the articulation of public services with the community. Statutory measures can be interwoven with informal arrangements created in and with community stakeholders, shaping a more favourable environment for integration (Mungai, 2013; Haugen, 2019; Silva & Sacramento, 2020).

The romantic idealisation of small places as naturally solidary (Haugen, 2019) may also overshadow possible tendencies towards increased social control and less tolerance of alterity, hindering the possibility of refugees establishing significant bonds and finding their *place* and sense of belonging (Wernesjö, 2015). Besides, peripheral rural areas may not offer refugees the comfort of their ethnic communities, or access to the lifestyles and spaces (in terms of consumption products, religious practice, and leisure activities) which would help to mitigate cultural shock. Whenever there are fellow citizens already settled in the new reception places, the integration of

recently settled individuals is more likely to be facilitated, given that the former assume the role of informal intercultural mediators, or “transversal enablers” (Radford, 2016, p. 2128), drawing on their bridging and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000).

Although participation in digital social media may partially compensate for the absence of fellow ethnic and national citizens and the lack of familiar cultural references (Alencar, 2018), it also produces subjective representations and geographic imageries of destinations which condition refugees' perceptions of the territories they have settled in. According to Christensen and Jensen (2012, p. 115), “there are both roots and routes in people's lives, and [...] the dynamic between movement (voluntary or forced), security and continuity is central to the belongings that frame people's lives”.

### *3. Multi-sited research in rural and intermediate territories*

This article draws on multi-sited ethnographies (Falzon, 2016) from two research projects carried out simultaneously in predominantly rural and peri-urban spaces. They combine participant observation and semi-structured interviews with refugee families and individuals, as well as civil society organization managers and front-line practitioners engaged in refugee reception. Access to interviewees was achieved through ethnographic snowball sampling (O'Reilly, 2012). Initial contacts with previously referenced reception organizations gave access to practitioners and other institutional staff as well as refugees. As field work developed, the number of subjects grew, mostly due to the researchers' further insertion into the refugees' interpersonal networks. Beyond merely conducting semi-structured interviews in a single session, data collection among refugees resulted from multiple on site interactions between the researchers and participants in their households or in public spaces and social services whenever it was suitable. Data collection in both research projects initiated in 2016, covering 10 municipalities in the centre and northern parts of Portugal, in the districts of Castelo Branco, Porto, Vila Real, Braga and Viana do Castelo. During the fieldwork, we became aware of how the translocal relations and imaginings of other locations influenced the reception experiences of refugees who were settled in rural and peri-urban locations through the EU Relocation and UN Resettlement Programmes as well as through spontaneous asylum requests.

Asylum seekers and refugees hosted through Relocation or Resettlement programmes tend to have higher expectations than asylum-seekers who arrive spontaneously since they have been invited in Italy, Greece, Turkey and Egypt to accept Portugal as a final destination. They sign contracts with their hosting institutions for a period of 18 months<sup>3</sup> and tend to receive more tailored assistance than the spontaneous asylum seekers who are assigned a social worker from Social Security. During this period, they receive free accommodation, payment of water, electricity and gas bills as well as pocket money. At the end of their contracts, they are expected to have found work and to be able to support themselves and Social Security becomes the institutional interlocutor for those who are still unemployed.

The majority of the refugees interviewed who were hosted through the Relocation Programme had not chosen Portugal as their destination but were given no other choice. Many of them had family elsewhere in Europe. That 65.4 % of the refugees who came through this programme eventually moved on to other European countries (Oliveira, 2020) provides an indication of their dissatisfaction and of the strong pull of elsewhere. Irrespective of their legal status or hosting arrangement, asylum-seekers and refugees settled in peri-urban or rural locations are more likely to be dissatisfied, faced with limited services and less resources, which they evaluate through their translocal relations, exacerbating their sense of injustice as they compare with the way other refugees are treated.

Relevant data regarding the availability of services in the territory is disclosed in the tables below, referencing the municipalities where field work occurred. However, given the sensitive nature of some of the data collected, we use pseudonyms for the refugees and fictitious designations for the localities within the municipalities where the fieldwork took place whenever deemed necessary.

Elizabeth Challinor's fieldwork (between 2016 and 2021) extended to include more locations from May 2019 when she began working in an additional project on refugee reception in Portugal<sup>4</sup> which increased her contact with refugees to a total of 15 families hosted through EU and UN programmes and 10 spontaneous refugees and asylum-seekers. She visited some of them in their households, attending their visits to lawyers, health, educational, Social Security and other welfare-related services. She also interviewed over 20 staff from third sector organisations, local councils and

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3• In the Relocation Programme some contracts were for 24 months.

4• FCSH-Nova University (Lisbon) research project PTDC/FER-ETC/30378/2017.

Social Security. Octávio Sacramento and Pedro Gabriel Silva's research, carried out between 2017 and 2021, relied mostly on a set of semi-structured interviews with technical staff of two umbrella institutions managing the Portuguese part of the Relocation Programme<sup>5</sup>, and with 14 practitioners, cultural mediators and services' managers from three municipalities and four local NGO. In 2017, in the most peripheral locale, the researchers also conducted short-term ethnographic field-work.

While Elizabeth Challinor's research focused predominantly on refugees (Challinor, 2018), Octávio Sacramento and Pedro Gabriel Silva examined how structural political directives were being transposed to the field and operationalised at the local level (Sacramento & Silva, 2018; Sacramento et al., 2019). Complementarily, both research projects addressed the relation between reception policies, settlement processes and the territory in a period when Portugal was implementing a territorial dispersal of refugees in inland depopulated and low density zones for the first time.

According to the OECD's (2011) definition and to Eurostat 2016 and Pordata 2019 figures,<sup>6</sup> at least five host municipalities where data was collected could be typified as *predominantly rural*, another four could be classified as *intermediate* or *peri-urban* (Iaquina & Drescher, 2000) territories. Of the 10 municipalities, only one was *predominantly urban* (table 1). Nine municipalities had permanent public emergency health facilities with hospitalization capacity within a 10 km radius. All had local primary and family health care services (table 2). All locations had local employment bureaus, public kindergartens and schools covering the mandatory secondary education level. Seven municipalities had university and polytechnic education institutions and vocational training was present in all the locales (table 2). Regarding internet access, all the locations, particularly around the urbanized centres, had 4G fast service and over 50 % had optic fibre coverage.<sup>7</sup> Although the majority of the locations held a common set of characteristics regarding the availability of services, certain disparities emerged. The most striking differences regarded total population numbers per municipality, with one presenting 115,888 inhabitants and three between 7,985 and 8,905 inhabitants (table 1). The innermost municipalities, like Idanha-a-Nova, presented a less dense public transportation reseau and the local economy was less dynamic.

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5• The Portuguese Council for Refugees (CPR) and the Refugee Support Platform/Jesuit Service to the Refugees (PAR/SJR).

6• See <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/data/database> and [www.pordata.pt](http://www.pordata.pt).

7• Source: ANACOM (<http://anacom.pt>).

*Table 1:  
Demographics and employment*

Municipality	Population <sup>1</sup>	Pop. Density (inhab/Sq km) <sup>1</sup>	Foreign population with residence status (% of resident population) <sup>1</sup>	Unemployed enrolled in the employment bureau (% of resident population) <sup>1</sup>
V.N. Cerveira	8,905	82.1	5.2	4.5
Paredes de Coura	8,504	61,5	1.8	5.9
Viana do Castelo	84,236	264.0	2.9	4.2
Barcelos	115,888	305.9	1.3	3.5
Vila Real	49,919	131.8	2.0	7.4
Amarante	53,035	176.0	0.8	6.9
Lamego	24,846	150.1	0.6	10.6
S.J. da Madeira	22,010	2,772.0	3.9	6.2
Oliveira de Azeméis	65,881	408.9	1.5	4.1
Idanha-a-Nova	7,985	5,6	6,2	7,7

<sup>1</sup> 2020. Source: Pordata ([www.pordata.pt](http://www.pordata.pt)).

*Table 2.  
Services availability*

Municipality	Vocational education schools <sup>1</sup>	Higher Education institutions <sup>2</sup>	Primary Healthcare services facilities <sup>4</sup>	Hospitals (public or public-private ventures) <sup>3</sup>
V.N. Cerveira	1	1	1	0
Paredes de Coura	1	0	1	0
Viana do Castelo	7	2	3	1
Barcelos	7	1	2	1
Vila Real	5	1	2	1
Amarante	3	0	1	1
Lamego	4	1	1	1
S.J. da Madeira	5	0	1	1
Oliveira de Azeméis	4	2	1	1
Idanha-a-Nova	1	1	1	0

<sup>1</sup> 2021. Source: Ministry of Education ([www.dge.mec.pt](http://www.dge.mec.pt)).

<sup>2</sup> 2021. Source: General Direction of Science and Education ([www.dgeec.mec.pt](http://www.dgeec.mec.pt)).

<sup>3</sup> 2019. Source: Pordata ([www.pordata.pt](http://www.pordata.pt)).

<sup>4</sup> 2012. Source: Pordata ([www.pordata.pt](http://www.pordata.pt)).

Although the tables above present characteristics of the local context which may impact upon the quality of refugee hospitality, we attempt to circumvent a possible *methodological ruralism* in our analysis by illustrating how the translocal and transnational social relations of refugees also play a significant role in determining how they evaluate the services provided. We coined this term from Wimmer and Glick-Schiller's (2003) concept of *methodological nationalism*, applied in reference to a post-war social science research tradition on migration which, focusing on the phenomena enclosed within the political and physical borders of the nation state, falls short of understanding the dynamics and fluidity of transnational migration movements. In the 1990s, breaking with the epistemological reductionism of methodological nationalism, new theoretical proposals emerged, particularly in the field of migration studies, to conceptualize transnational social phenomena that are constituted between and across multiple states (Basch et al., 1994). The concept of translocalism, for example, has been proposed to translate socio-spatial processes and practices linked to multiple locations, within and/or outside national borders, whilst still seeking to give due relevance to the "territorialised notions of belonging" and to the "local contexts and the situatedness of mobile actors" (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013, pp. 373-384).

In line with these theoretical approaches, our proposal to avoid *methodological ruralism* implies examining locations not just as physical spaces that host refugees, but also as spaces imagined (Salazar, 2011) by refugees interconnected with other (imagined) spaces. The territory thus becomes a fluid category and a liquid reality, moulded by political borders, administrative bodies, cultural forms, social relations and identities, but also constantly constructed by the individuals who inhabit it. The article steers through these fluid dimensions of territory. It illustrates how beyond their new physical social networks, refugees are connected in social media communities, where they maintain their social and family relations, make new contacts, share experiences, expectations and disillusion, seek psychological relief, make future plans and find solace against the solitude felt in low density territories.

It was within this multi-sited field of observation that we discovered what we have coined as *multi-cited* destinations: as refugees compare each others' experiences in different places. Their comparisons have concrete effects, not just on themselves and their choices, but also on their demands upon their hosting institutions and social services. Migrants and refugees are also *multi-sited* in their mobile commons and belongings (Challinor, 2012; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013) where knowledge circulates and multiple belongings are weaved together (De Genova et al., 2018). All this influences the way refugees experience the territory and relate to it. In this

respect, their minds may be "elsewhere" due to the powerful emotions evoked by mobility imaginings resulting in ambivalent feelings towards their current location.

#### *4. The inconsistencies of refugee reception in rural contexts*

Housing shortage constitutes a major factor in several countries in determining locations for refugee settlement (Aigner, 2019; Adam et al., 2020). This results in disparate offers of accommodation, ranging from large houses to flats, to individual rooms in shared accommodation, single rooms in hostels and collective dormitories. The quality and price of accommodation also varies tremendously. Minimal residence periods to qualify for social housing in Portugal, for example, are determined locally. A refugee resettled from Turkey to the small town of Santa Maria spoke of the families he knew who had been resettled from Turkey in social housing, paying five euros a month for their rent and of a family from Sudan who at the end of the hosting contract had been registered for social housing. He was faced with the prospect of having to pay the market price between 300 and 450 euros at the end of the hosting contract and he was still unemployed. He expressed his frustration at having agreed to come to Portugal when his family had been better off in Turkey. He had been discouraged by other refugees, contacted through digital networks, to go to Portugal; they told him it was a "poor country with high rents". However, he claimed that one of the arguments that had been used by Portuguese officials to convince them to accept Portugal as a destination was that after five years of legal residence he would be entitled to Portuguese nationality, whereas he would never acquire Turkish nationality if he stayed.

The quality of the accommodation provided by third sector organizations throughout the period of the hosting contract, was often a source of conflict. Humidity constituted a common complaint voiced by refugees, with the sharing of photographs and videos of mouldy walls on social media. One refugee, for example, interviewed in Viana do Castelo where he was visiting another refugee, complained that he was housed in very cold accommodation with his elderly father in a peri-urban town near Aveiro. He described the house as only fit for sheep or cows. He was so cold, he said he thought he would die. After three days they left for Germany to

join his daughter. The desire to reunite with family settled in other European countries is common amongst refugees. However, they are only entitled to asylum in the first European country where it has been requested. After six months, father and son were forced to return to Portugal since they did not have international protection in Germany and, after a period in Chaves, they were housed in a hotel in Vila Real by Social Security. Housing quality and its impact on well-being, physical and mental health has been duly referenced by Ziersch et al. (2017), who claim that it is important not just to attend to the general quality of housing (thermal insulation, soundness and safety of the construction) but also to affordability and tenure security. The latter is also an issue for refugees in Portugal since most landlords require guarantors or advance rent payment of several months.

Another inconsistency in refugee reception was equal access to Portuguese classes. Small rural locations were often unable to provide government funded classes since they only opened with a minimum of 25 students. In some cases, hosting institutions took recourse to volunteers often with no background in Portuguese language teaching or any formal credentials in education. This practice was not exclusive to rural localities. It also occurred in peri-urban and urban contexts, such as the city of Vila Real. There, a local third sector institution tried to compensate for the lack of state provided Portuguese classes with the volunteer work of a nurse who spared a few hours each week to teach Portuguese to a Syrian mother and her two children. This case illustrates how even in contexts less deprived demographically where a denser network of services is available, including higher education, there was no strategy for teaching Portuguese between the several institutions locally engaged in receiving refugees.

Ahmed, a middle-aged refugee from Iraq, hosted in a small country town, was offended that classes were given by teaching vocabulary from supermarket pamphlets and soon gave up attending. In Ladeira Velha, the social worker accompanying the first groups of hosted refugees, openly acknowledged the municipality's powerlessness to provide the much-needed Portuguese classes, due to difficulties in mobilizing local formal educational structures, and the local state employment office. She came up with an idea: to create a platform for employment services and a local organic farming company to provide an integrated system of language training, occupational and social-labour insertion. However, it was blocked by the lack of response from local state services. The social worker noted that the refugees were aware of the disadvantages of their particular location; they made comparisons with the reception conditions of other individuals in urban places where Portuguese classes were systematically available, and their quarters were not collective dormitories.

These cases illustrate how the relative (dis)advantages of settling refugees in rural territories need to be analyzed in a broader context of how their expectations are shaped by their past experiences and their participation in social media communities. Ahmed, originally from Iraq, had been resettled with his family from Turkey where they had been living for five years and were relatively well integrated with the children attending school and the father working as a mechanic. They were contacted by the International Organization for Migration and told that if they wanted to, they could resettle in Portugal. This was the only choice they were given, and they believed they should seize the opportunity to move to a European country. They arrived in Lisbon in July 2019 with seven other families from Iraq and Syria who were hosted in the larger towns of Porto, Gaia, Lisbon and Coimbra. Ahmed was in constant contact with them through social media and also visited some of them in their homes. He claimed that they had much better conditions.

An interview with the hosting institution revealed that prior to Ahmed, two refugees had been hosted in the same house and that they had left Portugal after one month. The social worker stated that they had learned from their mistakes because they should have provided more comfort: the house had been uninhabited for a few years, it was isolated, with little furniture, no internet service or television. But the house was the only accommodation they had to offer. They improved the conditions of the house before Ahmed arrived and were consequently offended when he complained. Ahmed, on the other hand, claimed that they spent four months without hot water. Why invite him to such a bad house? He argued that he was better off in Turkey where his house was better and he had work.

Many refugees spoke of their thwarted expectations, claiming that they had received incorrect or exaggerated information regarding the hosting conditions of the locations they were sent to. Some thought they were going to live in Lisbon and only discovered a day before or even upon arrival that they were to be hosted in a different location. This was the case of four spontaneous asylum seekers who had requested to be settled in the town of Viana do Castelo. Each recounted their story of surprise when the bus stopped in the town, and they were told their ticket was for a smaller location where they were finally met by a social worker who explained that they were still in the District of Viana do Castelo and housed in a small hostel. Ibrahim, for example, a man of Pakistani origin, in his early thirties, resident in Portugal for three years at the time of the interview, arrived in 2015 and stayed there for fourteen months: "I told Social Security we are not tourists, why do we have to stay in a hostel? Give us a house, and Portuguese language classes".

For Ibrahim and many other refugees interviewed, the government of Portugal that was obliged to provide international protection did not materialize for them at the local level in accordance with their expectations. Instead, Social Security or hosting organizations with limited resources failed to deliver and their services were compared through social media with the experiences of other refugees hosted in larger towns or other European countries. Refugees also expressed frustration at not being able to use their skills since jobs were not always locally available in their preferred professions and formal recognition of their qualifications was a lengthy bureaucratic process. Ahmed, for example, was frustrated that he had not found any local work opportunities to exercise his profession as a mechanic. The incapacity of the state and local authorities to adequately recognize refugees' professional qualifications and skills has been extensively reported, and considered as an obstacle to integration (Colvin, 2018; Whyte et al., 2019).

Service providers of small locations are often unaware of refugees' rights. In the town of Vila do Rio, the director of the local job centre initially refused to register Mohammed, a thirty year old refugee from Iraq, on the grounds that he needed to speak Portuguese first and that he required authorization to work. Portuguese law grants the right to work and to access health care and social benefits not only to refugees but also to asylum-seekers as soon as their request for international protection is admitted and they are issued with provisional residence cards, irrespective of their command of the Portuguese language. Mohammed, having spoken with refugees in Braga and Lisbon, was more informed of his rights than the director of the local job centre. He complained that he and his family had been sent to a small rural town that did not correspond to their expectations. "Portugal is not like other countries," he exclaimed, "where refugees are given more assistance".

Health centres in small locations constitute sites where refugees' rights are often denied in practice, particularly the right to free medical appointments. Similar situations were signalled by the personnel of the umbrella institution CPR regarding their follow-up of protocols established with local reception institutions; however, they recognized that the problems with access to healthcare were more easily solved in smaller places, due precisely to the greater proximity between practitioners and health services and the possibilities this offered for informal solutions. The discourse of this umbrella institution reveals the discretionary dimension of the informality of social services and practitioners' interventions. Indeed, what should be an automatic response from the services in the light of the statutory rights granted by the law depends, in certain situations, on the privileged unofficial access practitioners and

institutional leaders enjoy with local social and healthcare services. In such cases, missionary zeal, good will and impromptu solutions replace already instituted rights.

If the relationship between refugees and service providers is one of mutual trust, then the tight knitted nature of social relations is likely to facilitate integration. This was the case for Trudy, an African refugee, in her late twenties living in Vila de Cima – a small rural town in northern Portugal. The development of a relationship of trust was evident in the local council officials' participation in her baby's birthday party and in how Trudy spent Christmas with an official's family. "What must it be like in larger towns," mused the official in an interview reflecting upon the importance of informal networks, "When people are in the hands of an official who is scrupulous in not going beyond official duties?"

Equivalent situations were identified in Ladeira Velha, where close contact between the cultural mediator hired by the municipality, the municipal social worker in charge of reception and the group of male Eritrean and Iraqi refugees who grew up in cosmopolitan urban areas, helped to attenuate the difficulties the refugees experienced, settling in one of the most depopulated zones of Portugal. Trust was also built through the active intervention and advocacy of the social worker:

The three Eritrean and the Iraqi relocated refugees were met by the social worker in their shared house kitchen. The young men were confused by a bill sent by the local healthcare services regarding a recent medical appointment. The social worker knew that refugees were exempt from that kind of payment and offered to resolve the issue, stating that the health services should have known (fieldnotes, Ladeira Velha).

In the case of Ladeira Velha, the efforts made by the municipality to support the integration of the refugees extended to a partnership with a local farming company. The refugees were able to develop part-time occupational activities in the farm, allowing them to socialise with the employees. The company, specialized in organic farming, had a corporate culture which was supportive of collaborative and participative processes and communal meals were frequent. By 2018, two of the remaining refugees were given contracts by that same company.

The kinds of relations of trust described above could easily erode when refugees compared their hosting conditions and believed that their rights had been denied (Challinor, 2018). The end of the hosting contracts was often a moment of heightened tension when refugees were faced with the withdrawal of tailored support. In some cases, refugees interpreted the end of their hosting contracts as the withdrawal of

international protection to which they knew they were entitled. Such was the case of the refugee who had gone to Germany with his elderly father where he had been told by a lawyer that if he presented proof that Portugal was no longer providing international protection, he could claim asylum in Germany. Although the end of the hosting contract did not constitute a legal equivalent to the withdrawal of international protection, this is how it was experienced by some refugees as the following statement from a refugee hosted in Vila Real testifies: "once the contract is finished, they throw us out like rubbish".

## 5. *Refugees' quest for a place and belonging*

Many refugees gave examples of how the grass was greener elsewhere. Ibrahim knew Pakistanis who had moved to Germany and to Italy where, according to their reports, they received more money and better assistance. Another refugee quoted the prices of tomatoes in Germany to illustrate how much cheaper they were than in Portugal. Many refugees reported that language classes for refugees in Germany were given for five hours a day, five days a week, in stark contrast to the two weekly two-hour sessions offered in Portugal, if and only there were twenty-five students to make up a class. This kind of information circulates through the *mobile commons* referred to above (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013) and has a direct impact upon refugees' expectations.

Refugees also made comparisons with their own former experiences elsewhere. The following words, translated from Arabic, were posted on the Facebook page of a 17-year-old Syrian who had been resettled from Egypt ten months before with her parents and twin brothers in Santa Maria:

A country where you live and a country that lives in you...  
Egypt is the country that gave me the most  
She gave me the cutest and sweetest people, days and memories  
Grateful for every moment you lived  
Oh God, may God make a date with you soon.

Her words testify to the analytical shortcomings of the terms *settlement* or *resettlement* to refer to refugees' quest for a place and belonging since their "affiliations, belonging, affinities, and movements traverse and intersect various

borders and boundaries, establish associations, assemblages, and solidarities" (Isin, 2018, p. 121) which render them if not physically, often mentally and emotionally settled in mobility. The family had arrived in November 2019 and four months later the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic had prevented the language classes from starting, hindering the parents' perspectives of finding work. The father complained that he had lost 10 months of his life and he could not guarantee that they would stay in Portugal if he and his wife had not found work by the end of the hosting contract.

In situations where trust had not been broken, the tight-knit nature of social relations in small communities could facilitate the creation of a sense of belonging through the mobilization of solidarities. An Iraqi family relocated to a rural location in mid-2020, for example, was able to build community relations, brokered by a social worker and facilitated by their Catholic faith, enabling them to participate in Church activities. Although they were unemployed, the solidarity of neighbours opened the door for the parents to engage in informal work, cleaning houses. The mobilization of local solidarities could also cause discomfort when refugees felt that they represented downward social mobility. Such was the case of a 30-year-old refugee mother from Syria, resident in Portugal for three years, who expressed her feelings towards the offer of cleaning jobs in people's houses, made to her by an official from a local council:

I remembered my life and I felt like I was going down. I went home and cried. I used to have a cleaner in my house. The life I had before: when I was hungry, I just went to eat in a restaurant. When I was bored, I went shopping... to the hairdressers to change my hair style. I used to use contact lenses to change the colour of my eyes. They were cheap in Syria. Now I need things and can't buy them. I have to work hard now to try to go back to the life that I had before. But it is embarrassing for me to work in this kind of work. I spent all my life studying; not to be a cleaner. I always socialized with people from a higher social class to improve.

Her words illustrate how the quest for place and belonging is also a quest for social identity and recognition. Unable to join her family members who were settled in another European country, she spent many hours talking with them through social media and often received parcels from them through the post. She hoped to leave Portugal and join them as soon as she had acquired Portuguese nationality: the ultimate formal symbol of integration in Portugal represented for her, a means of onward mobility within the Schengen Area.

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## 6. Conclusion

The empirical data presented in this article elucidates the significance of place for refugee reception in Portugal by illustrating how the characteristics of rural and peri-urban locations impact upon integration processes. The data also reveals how refugee experiences of these in loco shortcomings are exacerbated by their multi-cited belongings: elsewhere constitutes a significant factor in colouring their subjectivities. The dispersal strategy adopted by the government was supply rather than incentive led: refugees were hosted in places according, above all, to the availability of accommodation and institutions willing to host refugees, with very little, if any attempts to match professional profiles or work experience with the local labour market or to take into account other personal preferences. These shortcomings of the Portuguese asylum system are also exacerbated by the socioeconomic challenges posed by the specific characteristics of rural locations described above, namely labour precariousness, unemployment and difficulties in acceding to market goods and to public services. Yet other characteristics, such as lower living costs, tranquillity and greater proximity between social, political and public services also offer opportunities, including the increased potential for mobilizing the social capital of local actors to compensate for these shortcomings and facilitate integration through closer community relations.

Refugees' expectations were also shaped by past experiences in other locations and by their participation in social media communities. Whilst we did not conduct direct fieldwork on digital communications, the article illustrates how the comparisons that we heard refugees make to other locations were only possible due to their digital relations. We found that our field sites were part of a network of *multi-cited destinations*, as refugees discussed each others' hosting conditions, comparing locations, services, housing, benefits received, language training and so forth, not only across Portugal but across other European countries. These comparisons had concrete effects, as refugees then made demands upon their hosting institutions citing these other experiences, which then impacted upon expectations and relationships, accentuating the ambiguities referred to above. As such, the data warns against the pitfalls of *methodological ruralism*, since the potential impact of the specific characteristics of rural and peri-urban areas cannot be determined a priori, or wholly in situ. By avoiding the trap of *methodological ruralism* and taking into account the

digital connections that affectively link subjects located in different places/countries, we contributed to fill a research gap in the study of refugee reception and integration processes. This contribution was mainly due to the understanding that the subjectivities of refugees and their integration and place-making are inseparable from the translocal social spaces in which their daily lives are inscribed.

Empirical observation requires looking both through a magnifying glass to capture the impact of the local characteristics and interpersonal relations in rural and peri-urban locations which may facilitate or obstruct integration prospects, and a telescope to observe the influence of wider inter-connected processes and other locations. Reception and integration policies should themselves be sensitive to the multiple socio-territorial scales of refugee belonging and find strategies that strengthen the integrative potential of their translocal and transnational relations. Building on the experiences that refugees bring with them, policies could encourage collective forms of organization for refugees and their formal involvement in the process of welcoming and integrating new refugees.

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## Authors' contribution

	Octávio Sacramento	Elizabeth Challinor	Pedro Gabriel Silva
Conceptualization	40 %	35 %	25 %
Data curation	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Formal analysis	35 %	30 %	35 %
Funding acquisition	34 %	33 %	33 %
Investigation	40 %	33 %	27 %
Methodology	34 %	33 %	33 %
Project administration	35 %	33 %	32 %
Resouces	34 %	33 %	33 %
Software	n.a	n.a	n.a
Supervision	34 %	33 %	33 %
Validation	n.a	n.a	n.a
Visualization	25 %	30 %	45 %
Writing (original draft)	37 %	35 %	28 %
Writing (review & editing)	30 %	35 %	35 %

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