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UNPACKING THE LOCAL IN THE STUDY OF THE RECEPTION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS: THE CASE OF LUXEMBOURG

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ABSTRACT. This article explores the significance of local contexts in the reception of asylum seekers by drawing on a qualitative study on the governance and implementation of reception policies in Luxembourg. Whilst contributing to a growing scholarship that has stressed the importance of the local dimension of asylum politics, the article advances the debate by unpacking the local and highlighting its internal multiplicity. It does so by exposing the heterogeneity of reception practices within individual local settings. Such heterogeneity, the article argues, calls into question an understanding of the local as a coherent unit of analysis in the field of asylum governance. *Keywords asylum, local, Luxembourg, reception conditions, harmonization.*

Steinfort, Luxembourg: 19th October 2015:

In the middle of the so-called "refugee crisis,"[1] a group of citizens sent a letter to the municipality of Steinfort to share their concerns and voice their opposition to the creation of a camp for asylum seekers. Confronted with a shortage of asylum accommodation in a time of increasing arrivals,[2] Luxembourgish authorities selected this small village of around 5,800 inhabitants, at the border with Belgium, as one of the destinations for newly arrived asylum seekers. The plan was to build an entirely new camp made of container modules in land owned by the state at the margins of the municipal territory, near forests and green areas. The camp was expected initially to host 300 people.

A group of citizens opposed this project and formed an association called *Biergerinitiativ "Keen Containerduerf am Duerf"* (Citizen initiative "No container village in the village"). They urged the mayor and the town council to protect Steinfort's residents and the local environment by opposing governmental plans. The citizen initiative claimed not to be against hosting asylum seekers *per se*, but it rather stressed the multiple negative repercussions that such a project would have on the local area in environmental, social and security terms. Besides endangering animal species and plants, the citizen initiative contended, the camp would constitute a ghetto, preventing its guests from interacting with the local community. In turn, this would limit asylum seekers' chances of social inclusion, whilst at the same time leading to possible security issues facilitated by the conditions of isolation and marginalization in which the guests of the camp would find themselves. The group of citizens was determined and gave rise to a legal battle that obliged state authorities to reconsider their initial plans and eventually give up the idea of setting up the container village.

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This opening vignette encapsulates some of the tensions that characterize the reception of asylum seekers. It shows how the accommodation of asylum applicants is an extremely complex issue in which several actors interact, different priorities clash, and multiple policy dimensions are at stake, often in a time frame informed by urgency. In the European Union (EU), state authorities are required to provide housing and support, such as food, clothing, and a daily expenses allowance, to newly arrived asylum seekers, to comply with Directive 2013/33/EU (the so-called "reception conditions directive"). In the EU context, the reception of asylum seekers thus refers to the whole set of support measures that member states should provide to asylum applicants during the asylum process. However, housing and support need to be provided somewhere. The reception of asylum seekers necessarily takes place in specific local settings and, as such, it needs to come to terms with place-based processes that undermine the projected universality and independence of legal provisions. Exposing the sort of challenges that state projects face in their practical implementation, the vignette highlights the centrality of the local as a key socio-spatial dimension in which the complexity and multiscalar character of asylum politics are most evident.

This article further investigates some of the processes that were only sketched out by the opening vignette. Drawing on the findings of a qualitative study on the governance and implementation of reception policies in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, the article seeks to understand what the local means in the context of the reception of asylum seekers. Our findings not only stress the importance of the local in a centralized reception system like the Luxembourgish one, but they also seek to unpack the local itself by drawing out its complexity and multiplicity. This is achieved by focusing on the specificities characterizing local reception practices as well as on the interactions between the state and local actors in the opening and management of reception facilities. The article responds to the exhortation proposed by Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Çağlar (2011, 69) to call into question the "spatial indifference to other than the national scale in migration scholarship" and highlight the contextual factors that shape practices and experiences of migrants in specific places.

In recent years, a growing number of studies in geography and beyond have picked up Schiller's and Çağlar's call by placing a greater emphasis on the local dimension of asylum politics (Doomernik and Glorius 2016; Hinger and others 2016; Glorius and Doomernik 2019; Glorius and Doomernik 2019; Blue and others 2021; Kreichauf and Glorius 2021). In particular, scholars have identified a mismatch between the importance of local settings as places where asylum seekers are received and the limited role of local authorities and communities in the definition of asylum policies (Glorius and Doomernik 2019). This body of work has looked at what happens within state structures and territories, thus rejecting an essentialisation of the state that has long characterized research in the fields of migration and asylum.

Whilst broadly contributing to such a strand of the literature, this article innovatively moves beyond it thanks to a spatially sensitive approach that draws attention to the materiality and spatiality of localized reception arrangements. In doing so, the article advances two key contributions. Firstly, it offers a more nuanced understanding of local asylum settings by emphasizing the impact of geography and materiality on the forms and features of reception practices. The point here is not only to underline the relevance of, or the differences between, localities of reception as others have already done (Doomernik and Glorius 2016; Glorius and Doomernik 2019). It is rather to stress that the local should be understood in the plural, as it can take manifold forms depending on contextual factors such as the position of reception facilities, their quality and conditions, and their management. This attention to the significant heterogeneity of reception practices within individual local settings situates the article within a strand of literature that has drawn attention to the unevenness of asylum accommodation (Vianelli 2017; Zill and others 2020; Novak 2021). However, the article goes one step further by underlining the crucial political implications that such uneveness has on the EU's objective to provide equivalent reception conditions across member states, regardless of location.

Secondly, from a methodological point of view, the emphasis on the materiality of reception practices problematizes an understanding of the local as a homogeneous unit of analysis. This constitutes an important breakthrough with respect to scholarship on the local dimension of asylum politics in which the local is often taken for granted as a fixed and given site. By unpacking the local, the analysis of the materiality of the localized everyday management of reception allows us to acknowledge the multiplicity of the local itself when the reception of asylum seekers is at stake. This has crucial analytical implications as it not only rejects an opposition between the "local" and the "national" as a discrete unit of analysis, but it also complicates comparisons between localities where these are conceived as homogeneous and coherent units. Far from constituting a homogeneous unit of analysis and policy making, the local is thus understood as a privileged vantage point from which to explore the multiscalar unfolding of asylum politics and processes.

The article is organized into six sections, including this introduction and the conclusion. In the next section, we situate our contribution within existing debates on the local dimension of asylum governance. The third section provides some context on reception policies in Luxembourg as well as some information on the methodology of the study, while in the fourth section, we examine the relations between state authorities, municipalities, and local communities, with a view to highlighting the extent to which local processes matter even in centralized reception systems like the Luxembourgish one. In the fifth section, we show that centralization does not produce homogeneity, by discussing the complexity and heterogeneity characterizing local reception settings in relation to three aspects: position of facilities, housing conditions, and type of support.

The "Local Turn" in the Analysis of the Reception of Asylum Seekers

The local dimension of migration and asylum governance has gained significant academic attention in recent decades (Bazurli and others 2022). Increasingly, migration and asylum scholars have identified the local as a key site of governance and politics, in which policies are implemented and migrants encounter institutions, street-level bureaucrats, and local communities. Such a "local turn" (Zapata-Barrero and others 2017) has been initially explored in relation to migrant integration (Alexander 2007; Caponio and Borkert 2010; Scholten 2013), but recently scholars have also directed their attention to the local dynamics affecting the reception of asylum seekers in several European contexts. Although reception is still primarily examined through a statist frame of analysis, thus reproducing what Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2003) called "methodological nationalism," a growing number of studies have stressed the relevance of place for the overall experiences of asylum seekers (Doomernik and Glorius 2016; Hinger and others 2016; Vianelli 2017, 2022a; Glorius and Doomernik 2019; Glorius and Doomernik 2019; Kreichauf and Glorius 2021). Calls have been made for a contextualization of local settings of reception and for an acknowledgment of their "situatedness in time and space" (Doomernik and Glorius 2016, 436).

A particularly important work for our analysis is the one by Sophie Hinger, Philipp Schäfer, and Andreas Pott (2016), whose concerns about what to focus on when examining the local level resonate well with our question of what the local is when we think about asylum reception. For them, the local should not be understood as "given, non-porous and fixed sites" (Hinger and others 2016, 445), nor should it be reduced to its institutional dimension by focusing merely on local policies and administrative practices. This would "simplify the complexity and dynamics of the field and ignore various antagonisms and daily contradictions" (Hinger and others 2016, 443). These authors thus emphasize the complex dynamics of negotiations, antagonisms, and conflicts that shape the accommodation of asylum seekers in a specific area and give birth to what they call the "local production of asylum" (Hinger and others 2016).

Asylum-related antagonisms and conflicts occurring in local settings have also been explored by other scholars. Maurizio Ambrosini (2021a, 2021b), for instance, described the local as the scale in which the "battleground of asylum" is most visible. Localities indeed expose the highly contentious character of asylum politics as multiple actors such as municipal authorities, state representatives, civil society groups, activists, and refugees themselves interact according to different and often conflicting interests, objectives, and rationalities. The outcome of such interaction is far from the "negotiated order" (Ambrosini 2021b) that is often depicted by studies embracing the analytical framework of multilevel governance in which conflict is often downplayed (Ambrosini 2021).

Conflicts might take place at the local level, but they are often multiscalar in scope, encapsulating tensions between tiers of government (Myrberg 2015; Spencer 2018; Oomen and others 2021). Literatures on "cities of refuge" (Doomernik and Ardon 2018; Oomen 2019) and on "sanctuary cities" (Bauder 2017; Darling and Bauder 2019) provide examples of cases in which local authorities proved to be more pragmatic and/or progressive than national migration authorities. Other authors, however, discussed cases in which local authorities took a more restrictive stance, either through administrative measures (Dimitriadis and others 2020) or through public declarations (Campomori and Ambrosini 2020; Ambrosini 2021).

Even though these studies have importantly called into question the presumed homogeneity of national containers with respect to policies, rationalities, and implementation, most of them tend to interpret the local as "a placeholder for the lowest level of government," thus "reifying the multi-level system through which migration is politically regulated" (Hinger and others 2016, 445). They tend to make too drastic a separation between scales of government instead of acknowledging their mutual constitution (Schiller and Çağlar 2009, 2011). In this article, inspired by a geographically-informed multiscalar approach, we do not want to reproduce a presumed antithetical opposition between the "local" and the "national" as discrete levels of government and analysis (Haselbacher and Segarra 2022). We do not interpret the local as a mere administrative unit, whose contours are somehow given and fixed. Far from that, we approach the local as a "sociospatial dimension of human experience" (Schiller and Çağlar 2009, 63), where multiscalar processes converge and produce localized and concrete migrant experiences (Chacko and Price 2021).

This approach allows us to show the extent to which the local matters, even in a highly centralized system in which local actors seem not to play a role, at least at first sight. Furthermore, this approach also enables us to highlight the differences that crisscross and subvert a unified and homogenous understanding of the local. Our objective is not to examine local reception practices as opposed to central state policies, but rather to explore the local as a privileged site where concrete, actual practices of reception can be adequately examined. We apply a spatially sensitive analysis that takes into consideration the contextual factors that shape the ways in which asylum seekers experience reception policies and practices in specific places (Vianelli 2017). The vantage point of asylum reception allows us to emphasize the multiplicity of the local itself. The article therefore shows how local contexts of reception are not only unique, thanks to their specific socio-spatial features, but also fragmented and heterogeneous as they are traversed by significant internal differences. Whilst reiterating that the local is certainly an important level of analysis, our work suggests that it should not be understood in rigid and homogenous terms, because reception practices and experiences also differ significantly within local contexts.

Studying the Reception of Asylum Seekers in Luxembourg

The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg is an interesting case for the study of the local dimension of reception, thanks to the small size of the country and the significant centralization of its reception system. Landlocked between France, Belgium, and Germany, Luxembourg is one of the smallest countries in Europe, given its surface area of 2,590 square kilometers and a population of 650,744 inhabitants in 2022.[3] Luxembourg can therefore be defined as a small state in which, as the literature on this topic suggested (Katzenstein 2003; Thorhallsson 2018), close interpersonal relations of important political players play a key role in shaping politics and policies that tend to prioritize elites and their goals in the country.

In the framework of the H2020 project CEASEVAL, we studied the governance and implementation of reception policies in Luxembourg through 19 in-depth, semistructured interviews with various actors involved in the national reception system or having a direct knowledge of it.[4] Interviews were conducted between October and November 2018 with a range of different research participants, including public servants (3), local politicians (4), municipal employees (4), and members of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (8). Focusing on the post-2015 phase, our study explored the implementation of reception measures at the local level with a view to identifying possible causes of convergence or divergence within the national system. In order to do that, two municipalities were selected as local case studies in which to investigate reception practices and implementation processes. Both municipalities had around 7,000 inhabitants—medium-sized in the context of Luxembourg—when the research was carried out. One is situated in the rural north of the country, whereas the other is in the postindustrial south.

We describe the Luxembourgish reception system as a centralized system because responsibility for the support of asylum seekers in the country is primarily in the hands of state authorities and municipalities formally play a limited role in this domain.[5] At the time of our fieldwork, in late 2018, the main actor in the Luxembourgish reception landscape was the Luxembourgish Reception and Integration Agency (OLAI)—a governmental agency under the responsibility of the Ministry of Family, Integration and the Greater Region (MFIGR).[6] OLAI oversaw the coordination and implementation of reception measures for asylum seekers.

OLAI either managed reception centers directly or through the support of two partners, which were Caritas Luxembourg and the Luxembourgish Red Cross. At the end of 2018, the national reception system counted 3,739 places overall (EMN Luxembourg 2022a, 33), distributed in 67 accommodation facilities across the country (Vianelli and others 2019, 27). OLAI ran 42 reception facilities itself, whereas 12 were managed by Caritas Luxembourg and 13 by the Luxembourgish Red Cross (Vianelli and others 2019, 27). The facilities managed

by these two partners were also funded and monitored by OLAI, which was likewise in charge of allocating asylum seekers to reception centers across the national territory, according to the availability of places and the profiles of applicants.

The role of municipalities in the reception of asylum seekers was quite limited, as was emphasized by an NGO worker involved in the management of accommodation centers: "Little, it is little. It [reception] is OLAI's mission"[7] (Interview 5, NGO worker, 15 October 2018). Local authorities could propose available facilities in which to set up a reception center or offer land in which new facilities can be constructed. Besides that, they had no direct role in the provision of reception measures and they were not directly involved in the management of reception centers. Rather, they played an indirect role by being responsible for the schooling of children, for community support measures (for example, school transport), or for maintenance work if asylum seekers are hosted in a building owned by the municipality. Mayors and municipal employees in both case studies confirmed that no one from the municipal body was working in reception centers at the time of the interviews. Notably, in one of our case studies, municipal actors even seemed to lack a solid knowledge of how reception measures were actually implemented in their area, and information such as the number of facilities and guests.

Unlike other European countries (for instance, Germany), Luxembourg does not have a compulsory distribution system obliging municipalities to provide reception places for asylum seekers. The introduction of a compulsory distribution quota has long been discussed at an institutional level, but an agreement has never been reached, primarily because of the opposition of municipalities themselves. The fact that mayors may also sit in the national parliament can be interpreted as a possible reason behind the failure to reach an agreement on municipalities' reception duties, with the fear of antagonizing local constituencies prevailing over broader national concerns. In some historical moments, such as at the time of the so-called "refugee crisis," the lack of a compulsory distribution system gave rise to some tensions between state and local authorities. This exposed the fine institutional balance underpinning the operationalization of national reception policies, drawing attention in particular to the frictions concerning the expansion of the national reception capacity.

At times, during fieldwork, it was possible to detect some frustration on the part of local policymakers and NGO workers at the behavior of OLAI, which was considered too imperative, at least at an initial stage: "The impression we have is that there was at the beginning—and it will continue we imagine—a kind of will of the state, of OLAI, to say to itself: we are the ones who decide, we are the masters on board" (Interview 6, NGO worker, 25 October 2018). Some municipal actors complained they had been sidelined, if not completely excluded, from

decision making on the opening of reception centers in their town: "We were presented with a *fait accompli*" (Interview 13, mayor, 13 November 2018). This was likely to be the case when facilities were offered by private actors like hotel owners through direct contact with OLAI, as stressed by a mayor we interviewed:

> The owners got directly in touch with OLAI to make their premises available for renting [. . .] It was about private initiatives [. . .] The municipality's approval to host asylum seekers wasn't really asked because it was the case of private owners who rented their facilities and in such situation the municipality couldn't dispute it [. . .] OLAI informed us: "We are going to accommodate asylum seekers." We didn't have a choice, that's absolutely certain. (Interview 8, mayor, 26 October 2018)

In summary, at first sight the case of Luxembourg would seem to constitute an exception to the "local turn" in asylum policy making. The Luxembourgish reception system appears to be quite centralized given the minimal involvement of municipalities in the provision of reception measures and the direct role played by the state itself through a state agency such as OLAI (or ONA since 2020). However, such a state-centered character translates neither into an attenuation of the importance of local actors, including local communities, nor into a flattening and homogenization of localities of reception. Far from it: the local is a crucial dimension in the unfolding of asylum politics, even in a centralized system like the Luxembourgish one. In this respect, the next section explores some dynamics concerning the opening of new accommodation centers in the post-2015 phase and shows how state authorities had to come to terms with local communities. After some initial tensions, state authorities were compelled to abandon the top-down approach that characterized their practices in the early stage of the reception crisis and adopt a more collaborative approach.

Negotiating the Accommodation of Asylum Seekers across the Country

The lack of a legal obligation for municipalities to host a certain number of asylum seekers leaves state authorities with little leeway when the full capacity of the reception system is reached. So, for example, in February 2012, MFIGR alongside SYVICOL, the association of Luxembourgish cities and municipalities, sent a letter to 106 town councils to gather support in locating facilities to be transformed into reception centers. However, the letter did not bring the expected results, as only eight agreements with municipalities were signed by MFIGR by the end of 2012 (Ministère de la Famille et de l'Intégration 2013, 192).

Something similar happened again in 2015, when the increase in asylum applications put a strain on the Luxembourgish reception system, thus forcing MFIGR and OLAI to find facilities as soon as possible to accommodate all newcomers. Corinne Cahen—Minister of Family, Integration, and the Greater Region at the time—visited several municipalities to look for support, but the results were once again meager. This reveals a certain

unwillingness of many municipalities to engage with this issue, thus confirming the findings of those scholars who explored antimigrant sentiments at the local level (Campomori and Ambrosini 2020; Ambrosini 2021b). As an employee of a reception center whom we met put it: "There are municipalities that simply do not want refugees and oppose new facilities by finding excuses" (Interview 2, NGO worker, 9 October 2018). Another interviewee explained this attitude by referring to an entrenched institutional culture in the country: "It is also a matter of mentality—in Luxembourg we like municipal autonomy [...] but, at the same time, we prefer that the state takes care of everything like a father" (Interview 6, NGO worker, 25 October 2018).

The outcome of this situation was that the national reception system drew close to its saturation point in September 2015 when the country faced a significant increase in the number of asylum applications. The government had to adopt exceptional measures to ensure the accommodation of asylum seekers. A special coordination group was created to design an emergency plan, gathering several stakeholders, including ministries, state agencies, the army, and the police. Local authorities were not included in the special coordination group, thus confirming once again the extent to which reception has been substantially conceived as a state matter in Luxembourg. The special coordination group was placed under the supervision of MFIGR and the High Commission for National Protection (HCPN), which was tasked with the implementation of the emergency plan.

One of the solutions identified by the plan was the setting up of modular housing units, the so-called "*villages containers*" (container villages), in four locations (Diekirch, Junglister, Mamer, and Steinfort), which were identified by HCPN, OLAI, and the Public Buildings Administration (ABP). The use of containers as a form of accommodation for asylum seekers is far from new and it rather encapsulates a broader trend toward the transformation of asylum reception into a logistical matter of moving and warehousing asylum seekers (Vianelli 2022b). The decision to set up container housing units produced significant tensions in most of the localities involved (EMN Luxembourg 2018, 42–43), revealing the highly contested nature of this issue (Hinger and others 2016; Ambrosini 2021a).

In the towns of Junglister, Mamer and Steinfort, citizens organized themselves to oppose state projects to build new housing facilities for asylum seekers, in what some would describe as manifestations of not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) attitudes (Hubbard 2005; Ferwerda and others 2017). Originally developed in relation to communities' opposition against unwanted land use for purposes such as landfill sites, nuclear facilities, hazardous waste facilities, low-income housing, and so on (Dear 1992), the NIMBY language has subsequently been applied in the context of asylum accommodation (Hubbard 2005) and refugee

resettlement (Ferwerda and others 2017). However, the validity and analytical power of such an argument has been problematized as too simplistic, biased, and even "scientifically perilous" (Wolsink 2006, 90), insofar as it considered to be part of the phenomenon that should be investigated, as opposed to an instrument of analysis or an explanation.

In the opposition against container villages, the most controversial and debated case was that of Steinfort, where a group of citizens appealed the state's land-use plan before the First Instance Administrative Court on several grounds, among which environmental ones featured prominently. They claimed that the construction of the container village would have catastrophic repercussions on the local habitat, on its vegetation and fauna, especially by endangering a rare type of bat that was considered a threatened species. These environmental arguments appeared to be a pretext to some of the people we met in the field, such as the mayor of another town who commented on the situation:

> The population opposed it, in the majority, for reasons which were probably not the ones they voiced. They have always cited environmental problems … the real problem was not that one. The real problem is rather that there was the impression that such ensembles would be ghettos. (Interview 1, mayor, 8 October 2018)

Yet, although environmental issues were central in the protesters' appeal and were widely highlighted by the media, the community group raised several other concerns about the state project, touching upon architectural, demographic, security, and social issues. It is not our objective here to examine the motives behind this local opposition and the extent to which it was informed by racialized and gendered perceptions of threat, which have been widely discussed in relation to other contexts (Griffiths 2015; Nagel 2016; Gray and Franck 2019; Fritzsche and Nelson 2020). Our intention is rather to use the case of Steinfort and the other towns to highlight the centrality of the local dimension of asylum politics, even in a centralized system like the Luxembourgish one.

In three of the towns mentioned—Junglister, Mamer, and Steinfort—the initiatives of the local population were successful, as they forced the government to withdraw its initial land-use plans and search for alternative solutions. The appeal lodged by the group of protesters in Steinfort was upheld by the First Instance Administrative Court, as well as by the Second Instance Administrative Court on the basis that an environmental impact study was missing. The government therefore abandoned its initial project and started negotiations with the municipality to build a new reception center, smaller than the one planned initially (EMN Luxembourg 2018, 42). In the cases of Junglister and Mamer, instead, the First Instance Administrative Court rejected the governmental regulations establishing land-use plans, arguing that such an exceptional procedure was not justified given the circumstances (EMN Luxembourg 2019, 35).

These examples show that the local does not coincide with local governments and formal policy structures (Hinger and others 2016), and therefore it cannot be understood as a mere administrative unit. Local authorities are just one among many actors who shape local asylum settings. Friction with local authorities as well as opposition from local communities, as in the case of container villages, obliged OLAI to adjust its approach after the first hectic stages of the reception crisis. Notwithstanding the highly centralized context, local actors resisted state attempts to conceive national territory as a blank and abstract space on which to impose its plans, regardless of localized specificities and interests. As observed by one of our research participants, "although it should have been clear from the start, it was understood only after a while that it was better to cooperate with municipalities, with municipal representatives and even with local associations too" (Interview 6, NGO worker, 25 October 2018).

OLAI acknowledged it was not possible to act against the will of the local population and the local town councils and gradually modified its mode of operation, particularly when new facilities had to be created. It moved from a low-profile approach to a high-profile approach, entailing education and persuasion of local communities (Dear 1992). On the one hand, a more collaborative approach was developed between OLAI and municipalities, as is demonstrated by the case of Steinfort. Here, following the annulment of the government's land-use plan by the Second Instance Administrative Court, state authorities started negotiations with town representatives to create a new reception center that would be acceptable to them (EMN Luxembourg 2018, 42). On the other hand, public events were organized to inform local communities about the opening of reception centers in their area and the ways they would be managed. This helped to increase transparency about these types of projects, while also providing a venue to address citizens' questions and concerns, thus promoting the sharing and ownership of decisions.

Different Experiences of Reception between and within Localities

The analysis of the process that led to the expansion of the reception capacity in the aftermath of the arrivals of 2015 highlighted the relevance of local actors in the Luxembourgish context. Formal centralization of responsibilities in the field of asylum reception did not prevent local dynamics and concerns from playing a part in national asylum politics and influencing government's decision making and operations in this domain. However, as we have already highlighted, this article does not intend merely to emphasize that the local is an important dimension in the management and support of asylum seekers, nor is it interested in establishing a dichotomy between supposedly fixed local and state approaches to the reception of asylum seekers. The article rather seeks to unpack that socio-spatial dimension of experience that is the local by calling into question its presumed fixity and unity.

This appears particularly productive through a focus on reception, because the latter sheds light on the inherent complexity and multiplicity of what it is normally identified as the local. In fact, our research shows that even in a small country with a centralized reception system like Luxembourg, direct control of reception measures by the state does not eliminate intranational differences in the ways asylum seekers are hosted and assisted. The reason for this is that the provision of the measures provided for by the EU's "reception conditions directive" is inevitably informed by socio-spatial and material conditions that are specific to its context. Consequently, reception conditions not only differ between states as well as between different local settings within the same country, but also within the very local setting itself. Such heterogeneity can be organized into three key dimensions: position, housing conditions, and type of support.

The first dimension, which we called "position," refers to the centrality of place in the experiences of reception of asylum seekers (Vianelli 2022a). The simplest way to show the relevance of the place of reception is by considering the unequal opportunities available in different localities, for example in cities as opposed to small villages. It is evident that cities are likely to provide more opportunities for asylum seekers and local citizens alike, as several research participants underlined:

> Surely there are also differences as regards what is offered by municipalities because big municipalities have a larger offering, and this is true for the existing local population as well as for the newcomers. This is how it is—if you live in a big city, you have other possibilities. (Interview 1, mayor, 8 October 2018)

These possibilities concern training courses, language classes and even job opportunities, but they also refer to extremely practical aspects of everyday life, like transport and shops:

> In small municipalities, there is a lack of services. So, we don't have businesses here, we don't have local shops. We need to take public transport to go anywhere and, as you know, public transport, especially in the north of the country, is sometimes very difficult. (Interview 8, mayor, 26 October 2018)

Furthermore, isolation makes it more difficult to establish or maintain contacts with the local population and other migrants. It also reduces the possibilities of engaging in social activities that might increase chances of inclusion, such as sports, arts, and hobbies. In fact, isolation often implies that the guests of reception centers "are lost in the countryside" where "they are one and a half hours away from their French class, or they cannot meet their friends anymore, or they cannot go to their football training anymore" (Interview 2, NGO worker, 9 October 2018).

However, the importance of position should not only be understood in relation to other local settings, as in the examples above on the differences

between cities and small villages in isolated areas. The position of reception centers also matters within the very same locality, thus calling into question a homogeneous understanding of the local. This was perfectly captured by one of our interviewees, who observed: "Sometimes it is the very geographical location of the facility in the local area that creates problems, and not so much the fact that it is in one town or another" (Interview 6, NGO worker, 25 October 2018). Inevitably, facilities that are situated in town centers, close to shops, services, and transport, offer their guests an experience of reception that differs radically from that of those who live in remote and poorly connected areas, albeit in the same town. In this respect, referring to a local reception context as if it were a totality might prove ineffective.

Moving on to the second dimension of heterogeneity, concerning "housing conditions," these need to be understood in the broader sense, encompassing several factors ranging from the quality of buildings to their internal organization. As several interviewees stressed, "there are certainly differences in relation to the quality of accommodation" (Interview 1, mayor, 8 October 2018). The most palpable one concerns the state of the facilities, which depends on aspects like their age and maintenance, the extent to which they have been renovated and are fully equipped:

> There are facilities that are quite modern, recently built and with all that is needed, [...] whereas there are others in dilapidated condition as well as facilities that are privately owned, such as hotels that had closed down and were not operating anymore. It is in these facilities that major issues can be found, as the building itself is not in good condition. (Interview 6, NGO worker, 25 October 2018)

Therefore, our findings suggest that disparity exists between different types of facilities even within the same local area. This inevitably affects reception standards, given that "the quality of living depends on each facility" (Interview 8, mayor, 26 October 2018). However, reflections on the quality of living conditions can be stretched further to include the ways in which life is organized in each facility. The number of residents per house and per room makes a huge difference in terms of quality of life, especially when cohabitation is forced, as is normally the case with asylum seekers. The size of shared rooms and communal spaces is also important. The possibility of cooking independently was also raised in several interviews as a factor significantly affecting the conditions of the guests of reception facilities. In some facilities, guests can cook for themselves, whereas in other facilities meals are supplied by a catering service, so residents have no choice in this regard. This might look like a banal detail, but it is extremely relevant, as it affects asylum seekers' autonomy and control over their daily routines. Clearly, facilities with cooking possibilities grant more autonomy to guests as opposed to facilities where catering is in place, and this ultimately affects asylum seekers' well-being and overall experiences of reception.

The third dimension of local heterogeneity that we identified concerns the "support" that is offered to guests inside reception facilities. In Luxembourg, it is possible to identify three types of facilities with respect to the availability of staff on site: there are centers where the employees of the Luxembourgish Red Cross or Caritas Luxembourg are present and available to guests, centers where only security personnel are present, and centers where guests are by themselves. For several people we met in the field, this is another important source of disparity in the ways in which asylum seekers are assisted:

> Regarding equal opportunities, I think that living in a facility where there is a team of people working there every day or living in a facility where the only assistance is provided by security agents or by a social worker who goes there from time to time … well, it is clear that we cannot speak of equal opportunities with respect to the care provided to the people who are in one type of facility or in the other one. (Interview 3, NGO worker, 12 October 2018)

The widespread idea is that reception centers where social workers are permanently on site provide better support to guests, as they have someone to refer to in case of need:

> Another huge difference is that there are reception facilities where there is a partner organization with a permanent welfare team on site, where people can always talk to someone in the case of problems, where there is also a physical presence on site who can reassure them, someone who can listen to them; and there are also many facilities—I think that is most of them […] – where there is nobody, where the social worker goes once a month. It's completely different. There are people who have no idea of what is going on, no-one to inform them about activities. (Interview 2, NGO worker, 9 October 2018)

Whilst someone might be tempted to interpret the lack of employees in a reception facility as implying greater autonomy for the guests, evidence from the field suggests this is not always the case. On the contrary, it is more likely to be the other way around, given that the presumed autonomy often turns out to constitute a form of institutional abandonment: "It's very uneven, that's for sure. In all the reception facilities in which there is no social assistance, people are simply on their own" (Interview 12, NGO worker, 8 November 2018). In short, the ways in which support is organized in each facility have a bearing on the life of its guests, thus constituting yet another source of differential treatment between asylum seekers that cuts across each individual locality. Each facility involves differentiated forms and degrees of support that do not necessarily match the profile of guests, meaning that some asylum seekers might not receive the assistance they need, while others do.

The great heterogeneity of reception arrangements that we sketched out in this section invites us to reject an understanding of reception localities as homogeneous units of analysis that can be straightforwardly compared. When we look at the materiality of reception practices, differences exist not only between local settings, but also within them. Differences crisscross each locality,

as they can be traced down to the very microlevel of facilities. They might concern the position of reception centers in the local area, the type and condition of the facilities, and the way in which they are organized and managed by authorities or by their partners. Hence, the analysis of the materiality of the localized everyday management of reception allows us to unpack the local and acknowledge its multiple nuances when the reception of asylum seekers is at stake. This constitutes a key contribution to studies of asylum accommodation in which scholars have recently started to stress the relevance of localities and the differences between them, but little attention has been placed on the heterogeneity of reception practices within individual local settings. In turn, this provides a more nuanced understanding of the local, constituting an important innovation compared to the ways in which it has been conceptualized and operationalized by studies on migration and asylum governance in the wake of the local turn.

Conclusion

This article has exposed the relevance of the local dimension with respect to the reception of asylum seekers, even in a significantly centralized reception system like the Luxembourgish one, where the formal involvement of municipal actors in the provision of reception measures is minimal. Despite centralization, local contexts and actors play an important role in the politics of reception in Luxembourg, as we have seen in relation to state attempts to set up new container camps in which to accommodate newly arrived asylum seekers in the post-2015 phase. In some Luxembourgish towns, local communities opposed governmental projects, thus obliging state authorities to replace an initial top-down approach with a more collaborative one, as well as to opt for smaller facilities instead of big camps.

Our analysis, however, has not restricted itself to emphasizing the centrality of the local in the reception of asylum seekers, as a developing body of literature has also been doing in recent years. Nor have we used the local as a unit of analysis for comparing between localities, like the two towns we chose as case studies, or for contrasting local implementation with central state planning. Rather, the article has deconstructed the local by investigating the complexity characterizing the reception of asylum seekers in Luxembourg, and emphasizing the negotiations, conflicts, materiality, and spatiality informing reception processes in specific places. Our analysis has shown that several contextual factors impact the provision of reception and, in turn, the experiences of asylum seekers even within a single locality. Local reception contexts are in fact extremely diverse, not just between them, but also within them, and this is due to differences concerning the position of facilities, their housing conditions, their management and the type and number of actors involved. In the field of

reception, the local itself is extremely heterogeneous and, as such, it cannot be adopted as a homogeneous and coherent unit of analysis.

Such a situated microanalysis of reception has significant implications for the broader EU policies in this field. In fact, the persistence of heterogeneous forms of reception within a state and even within an individual local setting invites us to reconsider the scope and feasibility of the project of harmonization of reception conditions at EU level. One of the key objectives of the Common European Asylum System is indeed the creation of a level playing field in which asylum seekers will be granted equivalent reception conditions across the EU territory, regardless of the country of destination. However, our study shows that the extent to which equivalent reception conditions can be offered to all asylum seekers across EU space is limited. This is not only due to each states' room for maneuvering in transposing the "reception conditions directive" and in organizing their reception policies, nor to the different local configurations that produce differences at subnational level. It is also due to the heterogeneity of practices and forms of reception that characterizes each local setting. If the position and type of reception facilities, the way they are managed, and by whom produce different experiences of reception in a single village in Luxembourg, how can equivalent reception conditions be offered across the EU?

Notes

[1] We use inverted commas to distance ourselves from the discourse of crisis that is often used, in an acritical way, to describe migration processes. Besides framing the movement of people as an anomaly in a presumed settled normality, the language of crisis also obfuscates historical, political, and economic reasons that produced displacement in the first place. What has been framed as the "refugee crisis" should rather be interpreted as the crisis of EU's asylum policies, which failed to stop asylum seekers at EU's external borders and to provide equivalent reception standards to all asylum applicants.

[2] In 2015, 2,447 asylum applications were registered in Luxembourg, whereas the total number of asylum applications that were registered the previous year was 1,091 (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et Européennes 2016, 90). The main countries of origin of asylum applicants in 2015 were Syria and Iraq (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et Européennes 2016, 90).

[3] Please see: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/AG.SRF.TOTL.K2?locations=LU.

[4] All interviews were conducted by Lorenzo Vianelli.

[5] The article refers to the reception of asylum seekers, that is those people who autonomously arrive in Luxembourg and apply for asylum in the country. It does not refer to so-called "quota refugees," that is recognized refugees who arrive in Luxembourg through resettlement programs.

[6] Following the adoption of the Law of 4 December 2019, OLAI was replaced by the National Reception Office (ONA) at the beginning of 2020.

[7] Most interviews were conducted in French. The translation into English is ours.

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