

Share advocacy briefing series: our priorities and recommendations for EU action

#5 Integration in smaller communities and rural areas

Although larger cities are still hosting the majority of newcomers to the EU, more and more refugees have since 2015 been received by smaller communities and rural territories. Particularly in view of the more ready availability of affordable housing options in these areas, governments have looked to develop dispersal and placement policies that more evenly distribute newcomers across their territories. Despite public debates on migration and asylum that can be negative, many smaller communities have also shown how they can offer a soft landing and warm welcome for newcomers.

Since 2015, at SHARE we have worked with smaller communities to build their capacities, expand their integration offers and give them a voice in national and European level discussions. Currently, we work with a coalition of regions to address common challenges and opportunities.

What are ‘smaller communities and rural areas’ in the EU?

At EU level, regions are classified using the [NUTS \(Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics\)](#) system, which divides the territory of the EU and UK into three types of region:

- NUTS 1: Major socioeconomic regions (104 regions).
- NUTS 2: Larger regions (283 regions).
- NUTS 3: Provinces, 3-4m population (1,345 regions).

The [NUTS ‘urban-rural typology’](#) further classifies NUTS 3 regions using population density to identify the share of the region’s population living in rural areas:

- 'Predominantly rural': more than 50% of the region’s population living in rural areas.
- 'Intermediate': 20-50% of the region’s population living in rural areas.
- 'Predominantly urban': less than 20% of the region’s population living in rural areas.

What about refugees and migrants in smaller and rural communities?

Migrants make up 2.9% (3.97m people) of the EU’s rural population. Migrants have grown as a proportion of the EU’s agricultural workforce, from 2.7% in 2011 to 4% in 2017. Migrants from outside the EU now outnumber EU nationals from other Member States in EU agricultural employment.

Smaller and rural communities in the EU have long hosted migrant labourers. Since 2015, when the number of refugees arriving into the EU rapidly increased and [national dispersal and placement policies](#) increasingly aimed to more evenly distribute newcomers across national territories, smaller and rural communities are playing an increasingly important role in receiving refugees and other vulnerable groups of newcomers. The expanded role rural territories play in hosting asylum reception facilities has in some instances created new, often transient, populations of newly recognised refugees and/or refused asylum seekers in rural areas.

Find out more about refugee and [migrant integration in smaller and rural communities](#).



What is the EU policy picture?

The [Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for 2021-2027](#), launched by the European Commission in November 2020, acknowledges that while the proportion of migrants in rural populations is relatively low, they tend to fare worse on most indicators of integration not only compared to natives but also with respect to migrants living in cities and towns. The Action Plan sets out various EU measures to address these disparities and support improved integration in smaller and rural areas:

- A partnership with rural regions in the framework of the Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas.
- EU funding via the [European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development](#).
- A commitment to exploring and facilitating rural partnerships to ensure inclusion and integration of migrants in rural areas.

In June 2021, the European Commission launched [A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas: Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040](#). The Vision addresses the broad disparities between urban and more remote territories that also present challenges for integration, promoting territorial and community-based approaches to rural development and planning a 'rural proofing' mechanism to assess the potential impact of EU legislative initiatives on rural areas. Implementation of the Vision will be supported by the forthcoming Rural Pact and EU Rural Action Plan, including the partnership with rural regions envisaged in the [Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for 2021-2027](#).

What should the EU do to help?

At SHARE, we believe that rural areas and smaller communities have considerable potential to offer welcome and integration for refugees and migrants, and in particular to provide good quality and affordable housing options. However, they also require sustained and longer term support to effectively meet the integration needs of refugees and migrants.

That's why we think the EU must:

- Support and promote territorial or space-based approaches for integration in smaller communities and rural territories, in which regional coordination frameworks support integration capacities and actions in smaller communities and enable differences in terms of migrant populations and integration frameworks across regions to be addressed.
- Ensure synergies and complementarity across EU funding instruments with respect to integration in smaller and rural communities, including the [European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development](#).
- Improve data on migrant movements and flows between rural and urban locations and on comparative outcomes for migrant and host populations, in order to support better regional and local level planning for integration.
- Address the lack of access to integration services and support in many rural and more remote territories, including specialist services for vulnerable refugee and migrant groups.
- Promote and celebrate the contribution of smaller and rural communities to welcoming and supporting the integration of refugees and migrants in the EU.



Our advocacy for integration in smaller and rural communities

- [Building Inclusive Territories: Refugee and migration integration for rural revitalisation](#) (2022)
- [‘The community’s welcome of refugees in rural areas: an incredible human adventure’](#) (2021)
- [Portraits: SHARE Rural Ambassadors for Inclusive Territories](#) (2021)
- [Small Places, Great Hearts: SHARE Network Welcoming Communities Video Series](#) (2018-19)
- [SHARE Expert Group: Inclusive Territories for Rural Integration](#) (2020)
- [Another Story from the "Refugee Crisis:" Resettlement in Small Towns and Rural Areas in France](#) (SHARE & Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), 2019)
- [Mayors in the Spotlight series](#) (2019-present)

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