Enhanced local-level willingness and ability to settle refugees: decentralization and local responses to the refugee crisis in Norway

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Abstract:

The sudden mass influx of asylum-seekers in Europe in 2015, emplaced major stresses on refugee reception systems and challenged central – local migration policymaking. This article explores how this crisis affected policymaking and implementation of refugee settlement in

1

the case of Norway. We show that the local level kept its autonomy in matters of refugee

settlement, despite the crisis context. Upkeep of local autonomy enabled municipalities to

change their policy, willingness, and ability to settle the increasing numbers of refugees by

enhancing municipal incremental problem-solving capacities. A major finding is that the

crisis provided motivation for local politicians and employees alike. Solidarity arguments

combined with self-interest motivated the shift in municipal policy. This case adds to our

knowledge of the importance of the local dimension of migration policymaking in crisis

contexts. Political decisions and implementation of settlement of refugees remained

decentralized, exemplifying the potential of decentralized welfare states.

Key words: Refugee crisis, settlement of refugees, decentralization, crisis response.

INTRODUCTION

The sudden mass influx of almost 2.5 million first-time asylum-seekers in 2015 emplaced major stresses on refugee reception systems throughout Europe. Whereas national governments were mainly concerned with general principles for restricting immigration (Brekke, Røed, & Schøne, 2016), local governments were more pragmatically oriented, faced with everyday challenges like finding accommodation for the newcomers (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016). Cities and municipalities are increasingly recognized for their role in devising and implementing their own integration and diversity policies (Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Qadeer, 2016; Zapata-Barrero, 2015). However, as Schiller and Hackett (2018) note, little is known about the local dimension of migration policymaking in crisis contexts. More studies have focused on the supranational level, examining the incomplete EU crisis governance of the 2015 refugee influx (Morsut & Kruke, 2018; Scipioni, 2018; Wolf & Ossewaarde, 2018).

Our study aims to help to reduce the knowledge gap on how the refugee crisis is handled at the local level, as a test of local governments' willingness and ability to solve the problem of accommodation for the newcomers. To elaborate on municipalities' room of maneuver in migration policymaking in crisis context, Norway is used as a case.

For years, Norwegian municipalities have argued that lack of available housing is a main reason for not being able to settle the requested numbers of refugees (IMDi, 2015; Thorshaug, Berg, Paulsen, & Svendsen, 2011). However, during the refugee crisis the municipalities settled more refugees than ever before. How was this possible, without major changes at the central local steering level?

The two following research questions investigate the importance of the local dimension of migration policymaking in crisis contexts:

- How can local-level *policy changes* for refugee settlement following the 2015 refugee crisis be explained? (RQ 1)
- How did these policy changes affect the administrative *implementation* of housing refugees? (RQ 2)

These two research questions allow us to study how the refugee crisis affected both local political willingness and the ability of the first-line services to increase the settlement of refugees. Studying the two questions together makes it possible to identify the interlinkages involved. One such interlinkage relates to the fact that both groups of actors (politicians and implementers) were independently influenced by the exogenous refugee crisis and how it affected Norwegian society and municipalities. The other interlinkage is connected to local policy change combined with changes in implementation. Schiller (2017) has demonstrated the gap between policies promoting diversity and practices for implementation on city level. Our study of the Norwegian case shows that implementation practices changed substantially in the period following municipal decisions to increase the settlement of refugees. The change in municipal ability developed without strict instructions from policymakers on how to proceed. Studied together, these research questions can shed light on the conditions that enabled Norwegian municipalities to double the settlement of refugees.

The research questions focus on the sudden willingness and surprising ability of Norwegian municipalities to settle refugees, even though no new housing policy instruments were introduced at the national level. *Why* did municipal councils alter their policies to increase settlement, and *how* did the first-line services responsible for housing respond to this greater

4

political willingness? The crisis resulted in a sudden and unexpected peak in the need for refugee housing, and the receiving municipalities had to find ways of coping. Elsewhere in Europe, housing for refugees tends to be mainly an urban challenge; however, in Norway, refugees are distributed across the country, making this an important issue also for rural municipalities. As the challenges are likely to differ between urban and rural municipalities, due not least to differences in administrative capacity and local housing markets, we also examine the urban–rural dimension. The aim is to contribute to the academic and political debate on the local dimension of immigrant policymaking and implementation in crisis contexts.

FRAMING THE REFUGEE CRISIS: FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL

National and local responses to the global refugee crisis have varied in Europe. Not only has the number of refugees applying for asylum varied greatly—different types of states have also been unevenly positioned to cope with the inflow. Increasingly, scholars have viewed immigration and ethnic diversity as challenges to the welfare state and to existing welfare arrangements (Norges offentlige utredninger, 2017; Sainsbury, 2012). The refugee crisis could be expected to have exacerbated these challenges. However, Sainsbury (2012) offers a competing paradigm, arguing that the challenges to the survival of the welfare state are linked to rights and processes for inclusion/ exclusion of immigrants in their new countries. This is supported by Steele (2016), who finds that ethnic diversity does not unconditionally decrease support for public social spending. However, Steele also admits that this does not necessarily apply in situations of a rapid surge in immigrants, as with the recent refugee crisis in many Western European countries, including Norway.

The Nordic states are "social democratic welfare" regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Sainsbury, 2012), with generous universalism, growth in welfare services, and decentralization of welfare provision (Loughlin, Hendriks, & Lidström, 2011). In the Nordic countries today, entitlement to most social rights is based on legal residency, and is not restricted to citizens only. Thus, immigration affects the welfare state and the municipality that delivers welfare services on the one hand, and the refugees on the other.

Although they all are unitary welfare states, the Nordic countries have developed differing immigration and integration policies. Denmark has moved in a restrictive direction, where new immigrants are framed as "temporary" residents, with restricted social rights. By contrast, newcomers to Sweden have been seen as potential settlers with rights equal to those of citizens (Borevi & Bengtsson, 2015; Sainsbury, 2012). In-between the two, Norway has shifted course, from being closer to Sweden in inclusive policies, towards the more restrictive policies of Demark.

The sudden increase in asylum seekers in the Nordic countries following the wars in Syria had not been anticipated, pressing governments to introduce crisis solutions that included temporary border controls and temporary crisis accommodation. In Norway, the situation enabled parliamentary approval of previously contested means of regulating immigration through stricter policies (Hernes, 2018; Regjeringen, 2015). In the aftermath, Norway has joined the European trend of a 'rush to the bottom', where the intention is not to stand out as more attractive for refugees and other immigrants than other European countries.

Even before the refugee crisis, Norway's system for settling refugees had not managed to meet the demand for housing. The system is based on full local autonomy as regards deciding the number of refugees to be settled (Hernes, 2017). Although debated in the parliament on

several occasions because of the long queues for refugee settlement, the system has been supported by all recent governments. It remained intact also during the refugee crisis.

There are several explanations for this. First, the central government has remained fully in charge of immigration policy and sets the conditions for asylum seekers. Another reason could be that the populist right-wing Progress Party, which is part of the current coalition government and was in charge of immigration and integration policies at the time of the crisis, opposed overruling the municipalities on questions of receiving refugees, even though the system for settlement was not working well. By contrast, the Swedish government gradually introduced central allocation of those refugees who did not find accommodation on their own. Of these three Scandinavian countries, Denmark has practiced the strictest national control regarding the settlement of refugees (Borevi & Bengtsson, 2015; Damm, 2016). The Danish state has allocated refugees to regions and municipalities since 1999, instructing the municipalities to settle the allocated numbers. The main argument cited is to avoid increased "ghettoization" in urban centers. Norway is a particularly interesting case for studying the local-level implementation of refugee policies in a crisis context. While Sweden and Denmark have employed more centralized models, Norway has retained a settlement model involving local autonomy, making it particularly well suited for studying the local response to the crisis. Before the crisis, local responses to requests for refugee settlement had resulted in a persistent gap in willingness to settle, explained by lack of housing. However, the crisis itself seemed to spur the local political and administrative levels to engage in settling refugees in ways that resulted in a doubling of settlement capacity.

Norway: The role of the municipality in settling refugees

The Norwegian system for receiving and settling new refugees who have been granted permission to stay involves a mix of state control and local-level municipal autonomy. There is a complex interplay between policies for reception of refugees, housing and integration. The central government and the Association of Norwegian Local and Regional Authorities (KS) have agreed on a model for allocation of refugees to municipalities around the country: the state *requests* municipalities throughout Norway to settle refugees, following the principles of burden sharing and equitable territorial distribution that apply to almost all municipalities. In turn, the municipal councils have autonomy to decide *if* they will receive and settle refugees, how many, and how to arrange for accommodation.

The ensuing implementation gap experienced with regard to settling refugees prior to 2015 showed that this decentralized decisionmaking system for regional distribution could not guarantee sufficient settlement (Schiller, 2017; Steen & Røed, 2018). One weakness has been the lack of instruments for the government to instruct the local level to receive and settle refugees (Hernes, 2017). Local autonomy to decide whether the municipality should receive refugees, and how many, is part of the Norwegian tradition of decentralization of responsibilities. Like the other Nordic countries, Norway has a high degree of municipal decentralization (Ladner, Keuffer, & Baldersheim, 2015). However, Norway stands out when it comes to autonomy for the municipalities to decide whether they wish to settle refugees, and how many.

Municipalities receive economic support for five years for each first-settlement of a refugee. The support was increased as a response to the crisis. In addition, the government introduced a temporary extra compensation for settling more refugees than requested. These economic

support measures are not earmarked for integration purposes, so their application hinges on local political decisions. When a municipality agrees to settle a number of refugees, it is obliged to provide first-housing and to organize a two-year introduction program. However, each municipality is otherwise free to organize the settlement of refugees as it sees fit, and to find housing on either the municipal or the private housing market.

The soaring need for refugee accommodation following the 2015 crisis did not result in new national political tools concerning housing. However, the Norwegian government increased the economic subsidies available to municipalities for expanding their rental housing stock, and extended housing allowance support to include refugees settled in shared dwellings. Otherwise, however, it was up to the municipalities themselves, especially the first-line-services, to find out how to solve the housing problem.

The success or failure of the settlement process depends on municipal council priorities as to the numbers of refugees to be settled, and on the local administration and first-line services with their problem-solving capacities and means available to support the provision of housing to refugees.

THEORY APPROACHES

This study investigates how the refugee crisis in 2015 pushed municipal responses among local politicians in terms of accepting more refugees, and administration for handling the increased need for refugee housing. Analysis of municipal responses to the refugee crisis requires a framework that includes an understanding of the specific contexts in which the crisis occurs, and diverse theoretical approaches to crisis solution. To explore how decentralization of refugee settlement affects policy change and local crisis management, we apply crisis theory to frame both policy change and change in implementation, because we

hypothesize that both kinds of actors were directly affected by how the crisis hit Norway. To follow up on the second research question, we apply theories of incrementalism and behavioral theory of policy tools, to analyze how the local administrations and first-line services responded to the increased national and local expectations for housing refugees.

Understanding 'crisis'

An understanding and definition of 'crisis' is essential for both political and administrative responses (Kingdon, 2014). One comparative study of crisis management in European states (Christensen, Danielsen, Laegreid & Rykkja, 2016), defines a crisis as a serious threat to the basic structures or fundamental values and norms of a system, where critical decisions must be made quickly and under highly uncertain circumstances. This definition includes natural disasters, terrorist attacks, pandemics, industrial and transportation accidents, and infrastructure failures. Another way of conceptualizing a crisis is to view it as an external event that causes societal reactions (Nohrstedt & Weible, 2010). In our case, the external event was the 2015 refugee crisis and how it hit Norway; the societal reactions would be policy changes in immigration and integration policies and how the new refugees were met by public institutions and society. With the 2015 refugee crisis, migration has again become an intrinsic marker of crisis (Schiller & Hackett, 2018). Kingdon (2014) stresses that there are many problems and crises in the world, but that only some issues enter the political agenda. He is concerned with how a given condition becomes defined as a problem for which government action is seen as an appropriate remedy. The refugee influx to Europe can be seen as a crisis that called for immediate policy responses, whether as a policy window or an opportunity to advocate attention to specific problems or press for policy alternatives as well as contested solutions as part of implementation. Further, Kingdon notes, policy windows are situations that are short in duration, and often require political flexibility. They may be

predictable—or unpredictable, as was the refugee crisis. For such a policy window to lead to changes, there must be politically acceptable solutions that can be coupled to the problem-solving process. Alternatives produced by policy windows are enhanced when they are in line with national or local moods, and are prepared by policy entrepreneurs like political parties, governments, municipal councils, and civil society. For policy windows to prove effective, the underlying ideas and proposals must have been developed before the window appeared According to Kingdon, policy windows contribute to priority setting, which is of importance for policy implementation.

Crisis management

Unlike recognition of a crisis, crisis *management* concerns implementation and does not include political decisions as such. In their comparative study of crisis management, Christensen et al. (2016) find that national crisis management is characterized, not by strict hierarchical control, but by hybrid coordination arrangements influenced by national contexts and the specific challenges entailed in various types of crises. Their study also reveals tensions between the need for central control and the need for local flexibility during the crisis. Apart from tensions between vertical and horizontal crisis coordination and management, the challenge seems to be the loose coupling between structural arrangements and practice. On the other hand, as regards implementation, such loose coupling allows for great variations in practice, which might also be a strength in crisis management. Christensen et al. (2016) compare national ways of coping with crises. Translating such experiences from the national to the local level opens up a range of possible ways of providing refugees with housing, within the same structural system for national-/local-level relations.

Incrementalism and "muddling through"

Integration of immigrants takes place at the local level, although the local level interacts with regional, national and supranational levels in governance of migration (Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016; Schiller, 2015). This was also the case in Norway during and after the 2015 refugee crisis. The lens of *incrementalism* offers one way to analyze how local-level municipal institutions responded to the increased local political willingness to settle refugees (RQ2). As described by Lindblom (1959, 1979), incrementalism involves political change that is made by taking small steps. This allows the implementation of a policy to vary over time and between spaces without requiring major new decisions about the political goals, thus reducing controversies. Further, according to Lindblom (1979, p. 520), "incremental politics are intelligently exploratory when linked with sequences of trial and error" and where ends and means are closely intertwined. It might seem counterintuitive to rely on a "small-steps approach" for handling a crisis, given the need for comprehensive and immediate action. However, Lindblom (1979) points out that incrementalism is not necessarily slow-moving: incremental steps can be made quickly, precisely because they are only incremental. This is in line with the above definition of crisis. The very core of incrementalism also corresponds to the highly uncertain circumstances surrounding a crisis. Building on small steps, incrementalism does not call for comprehensive decisions that may stir up antagonisms and political controversy. Embedded in incrementalism is the opportunity to explore the problem-solving capacities and the room for maneuver available to implementers, opening up for alternative ways of "muddling through" a crisis (Hansen, 2014). The usefulness of the incremental approach is related to the understanding that political change is enhanced if it does not challenge the existing fundamental consensus about the rules of the game or other basic values. This speaks to the Norwegian case, where there is

agreement about the division of responsibilities between government and local authorities as to settling refugees. Small steps within the agreed model need not alter the established relations or upset the actors involved, whereas major steps and changes would require resources and political will (Halpern & Mason, 2015).

Motivational aspects in policy content

As noted, settlement of refugees in Norway is embedded in a discourse about local autonomy where the municipal council decides *if* they want to settle new refugees in their community. These decisions lie in-between government expectations that the municipalities should take the responsibility to cooperate in solving the refugee challenge, and the ability of the municipal administration and first-liners to implement municipal decisions aimed at increasing the settlement of refugees. Incremental steps as outlined above rely on, *inter alia,* the ability and motivation of the responsible units and individual implementers to explore their alternative room to maneuver. In their study of behavioral assumptions of policy tools Schneider and Ingram (1990), like Kingdon (2014), have elaborated on the motivational devices in policy content surrounding the implementation, indicating that the policy or the policy goals themselves are what motivates the implementers. Schneider and Ingram's premise is that public policy and policy tools attempt to get people do things they otherwise would not have done, or enable them to do things they might not have done otherwise. They are concerned about policy tools aimed at influencing agency officials in other ways than by coercion or financial tools. This is relevant in a system where tasks are decentralized from one level of government to another and without hierarchical control between the levels, and where the implementation (here: housing of refugees) is more goal-oriented than regulated by law. In such a system, implementers' perceptions of what is right, important and possible will affect their work. Here, Schneider and Ingram underline the importance of capacity and

learning tools, as well as symbolic and encouraging tools. To take the Norwegian case, they can have a major role in influencing the front-line services to work in alternative ways so as to increase settlement of refugees. In their study of innovation in the public sector, Berry and Berry (2014) distinguish three internal factors important for the motivation and ability of an organization to incorporate new political goals. The first concerns the unit's own understanding of the problem and whether the problem is in acute need of problem-solving. Secondly, resources or policy tools and barriers likewise affect possibilities. A third factor is correspondence with other policy fields, like broader integration of refugees in our case. Together the motivational aspects in policy content and first-liner access to policy tools deemed relevant can contribute to explaining how Norwegian municipalities managed to double their settlement of refugees in only two years.

DATA AND METHODS

The main data source is an anonymized web-survey distributed in August 2017 to the 401 (out of 426) Norwegian municipalities that had received refugees during the previous three calendar years. The survey was targeted at those responsible for refugee housing, but could in some cases be answered by others in the municipality who were familiar with refugee housing. The aim was to learn more about how the municipalities had managed to increase their settlement of refugees substantially between 2014 and 2016. Response rate was 58%; responses were representative in terms of size of municipality, centrality, and the increase in refugee settlement. The survey asked about experiences with refugee settlement before and after the crisis, motivation for settling refugees, housing instruments used to find accommodation, perceptions of the municipality's capability to cope with abrupt shifts in the need for refugee accommodation, conditions in local housing markets, and housing and neighborhood quality for the refugees who were settled after the crisis. The survey included

some open questions, to enable respondents to describe the settlement situation in their municipality in further detail.

To contextualize the survey data, we use register data on municipalities and settlement of refugees from Statistics Norway, the Directorate of Diversity and Integration (IMDi) and the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI).

Interviews with employees responsible for housing refugees (nine municipalities) complement the survey data. Two expert interviews add to insights concerning motivations. Quotes based on project interviews are specifically marked; otherwise quotes stem from responses to the open questions in the survey. Further details on the organization of the survey, the questionnaire and response rates can be found in Søholt, Nygaard, Støa & Hauge (2018).

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The empirical results are ordered according to the initial research questions. First, we describe and explain the main policy changes at local level, and then examine how changes in policy affected the practical implementation of refugee housing.

RQ 1: How to explain local-level policy changes?

The increase in total settlement of refugees from 2014 to 2016 reflects the policy change in Norwegian municipalities following the refugee crisis. From being reluctant to settle refugees, municipalities all over the country took co-responsibility for increasing the first-settlement of refugees who had been granted permission to stay in Norway.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 shows the change in municipalities' willingness to settle refugees, from 1995 to 2018. Willingness and capacity to increase their refugee settlement grew, as seen by the sharp rise in settlement from 7,672 refugees in 2014 to 15,221 refugees in 2016. Due to the national model for regional distribution, both urban and rural municipalities decided to increase their settlement of refugees. The proportional increase was generally greatest in the smallest rural municipalities (142%), whereas the numerical increase was greatest in the capital, Oslo.

Municipal motivations for policy change

In the Nordic context, the Norwegian municipal policy change in willingness to receive and settle refugees contributes to add valuable insights into local responses to international refugee crises. In contrast to Denmark and Sweden, the Norwegian government has continued to allot responsibility for these decisions to the municipal councils, despite their low willingness and ability to settle refugees before the crisis. Examination of the likely motivations may help in explaining the municipal shift in readiness to increase the settlement of refugees following the crisis.

[Figure 2 about here]

Survey respondents were given a list of possible motivations for receiving refugees and were asked to indicate the three items they found most applicable for their municipal councils. (See Fig. 2.) The statements included motivations related to both solidarity (dark shading) and self-interest (light shading). Figure 2 shows that solidarity motivations were generally ranked higher than self-interest motivations. Two thirds of the respondents saw the responsibility to respond to national requests for settlement as the main motivation for greater local political willingness to receive more refugees, followed by the availability of financial compensation measures. Respondents from 75% of the municipalities emphasized considerations that

included both solidarity and self-interest. We note the clear difference between large and small municipalities: Oslo and the four other big cities gave priority to solidarity considerations, whereas only the smallest municipalities held that refugees could bring desirable in-migration. The widespread motivations related to the solidarity alternatives (dark shading) deviate somewhat from the findings of studies of refugee settlement before the crisis, when municipal decisions had proven inadequate for meeting the need for settlement. Steen (2009, 2016) has shown that, before the crisis, motivations were generally in line with economic and instrumental arguments, without totally ignoring symbolic politics in favor of receiving refugees. A representative of the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) explained the motivational shift among local politicians and first-liners by reference to the refugee crisis itself:

> Those pictures of the children in the Mediterranean, they did something to the popular mentality. I've never experienced such a change before. There was this clear feeling in the municipalities that we would manage this [provision of housing for refugees] together. (KS expert, project interview, 2018)

Another indication of a change in motivation is that, in 2015, the aggregated decisions of the municipal councils to settle refugees surpassed the total requests for settlement from the state (IMDi Statistics, see Figure 1). This corresponds with a decision made by the board of KS in September 2017, in response to the drop in numbers of new arrivals of asylum-seekers in Norway. In line with the greater willingness of municipalities to settle refugees, the board requested the central government to consider increasing the number of UN refugees (KS, 2017). Further, the board argued that the integration competence that had been developed in the municipalities should be maintained, as one way of being prepared for possible future

peaks. According to the KS interviewee, that was the first time the association had involved itself in immigration policy. The solidarity expressed in the municipalities' motivations for increasing the settlement of refugees corresponds with the more positive attitudes towards immigrants among the population as measured in social surveys (Hellevik & Hellevik, 2017). There is reason to believe that the new solidarity expressed by the local politicians was a motivational factor for the implementers, in addition to the crisis itself.

RQ 2: How did policy changes affect administrative *implementation* of housing refugees*?*

The second research question concerns how the new municipal political willingness to settle refugees affected local-level implementation. This is important for understanding local responses to the refugee crisis, for two reasons. First, the Norwegian municipalities' success in doubling the settlement of refugees indicates that the local political decisions and actual implementation during the crisis were somehow linked. Second, there were no new housing policy tools available except for better financing of existing measures. When the municipalities decided to increase their settlement of refugees, neither politicians nor local administrations knew the exact need for housing, local housing opportunities, or whether the increase would be temporary or more long-term. Few municipalities have vacant housing available at any time, and municipal social housing is limited in Norway, about 4% of the total stock of housing.[i] Consideration must also be given to the characteristics of those to be settled—for instance, families need family dwellings, whereas single refugees need smaller dwellings, or can be housed together in bigger units. In general, municipalities cannot select the refugees to be settled in accordance with available housing.

When asked how their municipalities solved the problem of providing housing for increasing numbers of refugees, respondents generally answered that they had continued as usual, but many also mentioned expanding the tool-kit available as regards housing. "Continuing as usual" meant that they used the same housing instruments as before, but intensified the use and their efforts:

> I've noticed how my colleagues work with refugees, making every possible effort to settle more people. I can't see that the municipal administration was prepared for the big increase in settlement. (Respondent from medium-sized municipality)

To increase the housing available to refugees, the municipalities could expand their housing stock, give priority to refugees in available dwellings, or use the private rental market. Of the 237 municipalities that responded to the survey, 69 elaborated further, in open comments, on what they did to increase the housing stock. About 70% of these respondents stated that they had applied new ways of getting more housing. Of the 82 respondents that elaborated on whether they gave priority to refugees in available municipal housing or used the private market, 82% stated that they had introduced new ways of working in addition to their existing practice. Together, these open answers indicate that many of the municipalities changed their behavior in order to acquire housing for the new refugees. One approach could be new construction of social housing. However, that is time-consuming, requires planning, political decisions, and budgeting, and is seldom suitable for dealing with sudden surge in the need for housing. Still, around one quarter of the municipalities bought or built new dwellings, and

initiated co-operation with private developers to build new rentals. Grants and loans from the Norwegian State Housing Bank (Husbanken) supported this strategy.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 shows a considerable increase in number of municipal dwellings acquired with the help of national public grants and loans from 2014 to 2016. The share of grants covering total costs varied between 23% (2016) and 30% (2014). The share of loans varied between 65% (2014) and 88% (2015) of the costs. The strategy of increasing the municipal housing stock, supported by policy means from the Norwegian State Housing Bank, indicates that municipalities were gearing up for a long-term need for more housing, in line with the intentions behind these economic means. Strategies that include investments are normally based on local political decisions.

A more immediately effective approach was to prioritize settlement of refugees in existing social housing, as was done by about one third of the municipalities in our study. An additional strategy was to reduce the need for housing, by accommodating single refugees in shared public or private dwellings, as practiced for about half of the relevant refugee population. In most cases, these strategies were available to the first-line services without local political decisions. However, the main strategy available to the first-line services involved exploring the private rental market, as did some 80% of the larger municipalities. In total, two out of three refugees were settled through the private rental market in 2016.

[Table 2 about here.]

Table 2 shows that the municipalities increased their use of both social housing and private rentals from 2014 to 2016 to accommodate refugees. [ii] The increase was highest in the private rental market—117%, as against an increase of 64% in social housing.

This move towards prioritizing the private market over social housing entailed a shift in housing segments and new ways of working. It implied a new departure, from ordering the construction of dwellings or using the available social housing, to include networking and becoming an attractive partner for property-owners, as well as facilitating the conditions for refugees in this segment of the rental market.

> There have to be positive accounts and stories circulating if we are to be able to receive more refugees. I've developed close relations with property-owners and employers. We have to cultivate these relations to make them our ambassadors. (Respondent, medium-sized municipality)

Municipalities became proactive in their efforts to access more private housing for refugees. Both urban and rural municipalities hired personnel or reorganized to make it possible for specific employees to focus on accessing more dwellings by working together with the private rental market to achieve local policy goals about refugee settlement. Municipalities intensified their efforts towards landlords, and worked to enhance the refugees' own capacities to operate in the market. Municipal representatives called on property-owners, responded to advertisements, provided information on the refugees' economic situation, and what the municipality could do in case of landlord/refugee conflicts. Some posted lists of private vacancies on the municipal webpage. In small municipalities, employees also sought information about potential vacancies through their private networks—an important step, because in small localities public advertisements are rarely posted for vacant dwellings. A notable factor was the empathy in the population: in both urban and rural areas, property-owners themselves contacted the local administration to offer dwellings for refugees.

> Most of the private dwellings we use for housing refugees have come as the
> result of initiatives taken by private property-owners towards the
> municipality. (Respondent, big city)

> It's become trendy to rent out to refugees! (Respondent, Oslo city)

These initiatives from private property-owners underscore the prevailing positive local attitudes towards refugees. This mood probably also contributed to refugees' ability to self-settle. Some 20% of the municipalities reported that refugees had managed to self-settle in the private market in agreement with the municipality, and as part of the municipal quota for receiving and settling refugees.

Most municipalities employed a range of tools and methods in their settlement work. Quite a few introduced practices and methods that were new to that municipality and had been adopted from other municipalities. This was especially the case in small municipalities. The big cities, on the other hand, mainly continued their established approaches, while also experimenting with and developing cooperation with the private market.

Autonomy and motivation

A special feature of local autonomy in the housing field as practiced in Norway is that the municipalities can decide how much and how they will engage in social housing, as that is not regulated by law. Housing is part of the welfare policy, but is not a social right (Torgersen 1987); refugees are entitled to housing only with their first dwelling. Two findings from the survey indicate factors that underpinned the first-liners' reinforced motivation to increase the settlement of refugees. First, the anchoring of policy and implementation at senior level proved central in motivating first-line services, accessing resources, and confirming or

adjusting practices in these services. Second, two-thirds of the respondents said they enjoyed considerable room for maneuver in finding local solutions for refugee housing. They also worked in teams with others involved in the integration of refugees. Comments in the survey and interviews in some municipalities reinforce the impression that team spirit provided motivation, and that those working with refugees found their job important and meaningful.

> Many on the staff are very engaged and successful in their jobs. They get super-charged when they feel involved. (Respondent, big city)

> Work on settling refugees could be speeded up because of the employees' willingness and capacity to work extra hours, think in new ways about housing, and take quick decisions. (Respondent, small municipality)

This is in line with the findings of an earlier study of agreed self-settlement among refugees in Norway, which confirmed the importance of employees' dedication to their work (Søholt, Henningsen, & Dyb, 2017).

An external factor stemming from how the private market works also influenced motivation. In Norway, private rentals are randomly distributed in the local housing market, whereas social housing is generally concentrated to specific neighborhoods. Except for in Oslo and a few other urban areas, there are few professional landlords with rental buildings. The main stock of private rentals consists of individual dwellings rented out temporarily by property-owners who find themselves with an extra dwelling (Nordvik & Gulbrandsen, 2009). According to our respondents, greater use of the private market had unintended but desired effects: because of the random dispersion of private rentals, using the private market improved the spatial integration of refugees.

Two of three of respondents confirmed that they can continue to settle considerable numbers of refugees, which underlines the change in the municipalities' own perceptions of their *ability* to settle refugees. At the time of the survey, the prospects for future settlement were decreasing. One quarter of our respondents opined that the municipality would have vacant dwellings if this continued—especially in small, rural municipalities. One reason mentioned in project interviews was the long-term contracts established with private property-owners.

DISCUSSION

We have shown how the refugee crisis contributed to a policy change in municipal councils, with increased willingness and subsequent ability to settle refugees. In view of the change in local political motivations, from emphasizing self-interest to solidarity arguments, and the strong impression from interviews and survey comments from first-liners, we hold that the crisis and the policy content surrounding the crisis independently motivated both municipal politicians and implementers for change (Berry and Berry 2014; Kingdon 2014; Nohrstedt & Weible, 2010; Schneider and Ingram 1990). While the crisis resulted in policy change on municipal level, the policy change itself brought only small, incremental changes in how first-line services went about arranging housing for refugees. Still, to meet the increased need for housing, the municipalities expanded and adjusted their approaches, including exploring the private rental market. Tailoring the municipal tool-kit to the local housing market was facilitated by the extensive autonomy available at local political and administrative levels. Moreover, the change in practice resulted in unintended but desirable outcomes, like improved local spatial distribution of refugees, spurring the first-line-services to further explore accessing the private market.

Policy change under crisis uncertainty

The refugee crisis affected Norway at all levels of government. The transboundary character

of the crisis, with large numbers of people entering the country in unprecedented and

uncontrolled ways, resulted in a wide range of societal reactions—from the government, from

local authorities and civil society (Aasen, Haug, & Lynnebakke, 2017; Nohrstedt & Weible,

2010). For the local authorities, the refugee crisis brought requests and expectations from the

government and often from the communities, to settle more refugees. The character of the

crisis as such was not new to the municipalities, but the volumes were of completely new and

unexpected dimensions. Moreover, as of late 2015 and early 2016 no one knew whether the

crisis would be temporary or long-term. Thus, in the beginning, the government did not know

whether the refugee crisis would necessitate a new local settlement regime for dealing with

the greater need for housing. While the state reacted towards this uncertainty with stricter

immigration policies, the municipalities did the opposite: they responded with increased

willingness to receive refugees, and to strengthen their competencies and capacities to handle

the growing influx.

Bottom–up

The refugee crisis is global, but responses lie within the various geographical and

governmental levels, with the risk of lack of structural connections. Christensen et al. (2016)

found that the challenges arising from the specific crisis and national contexts influenced

national crisis management. In our study, the national context was one of decentralization and

local autonomy in determining how many refugees to be settled and how. Even though the

municipalities had not responded well to earlier requests for settlement, the central government did not alter the division of responsibilities. Changing the system might have spurred serious criticism of the government for moves to decrease decentralization, diverting attention from the urgent task at hand: settlement of many refugees. Instead, and unlike Sweden and Denmark, local autonomy in providing accommodation for refugees was maintained.

To achieve greater settlement of refugees, both urban and rural municipalities took their point of departure in the local housing market context, engaging in a "bottom-up place-sensitive approach" (Penninx & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2016: 155) characterized by small steps (Lindblom, 1979) and frontline pragmatism (Jensen, 2018)—an approach in line with the theoretical incrementalist paradigm described above. This incrementalistic approach towards refugee settlement and housing entailed somewhat different solutions from one municipality to another, helped by the loose coupling between local understandings of the crisis, established practices and solutions at hand. The crisis opened a "window of opportunity" for the municipalities to explore the private market (Kingdon 2014). However, municipalities differ with regard to their private markets, so the first-line services had to tailor their approaches to the local setting (Christensen et al. 2016; Lindblom 1979). They could learn from others, through capacity building and diverse learning tools, but always needed to adapt their approaches to the local context, and taking into account the specific refugees to be settled. Such adaptation to the local setting was possible because of Norway's decentralization of the implementation of settling refugees. Previous practices and experiences guided the administration and the first-line services in their exploration of possibilities to manage this task within the framework of existing national and local housing policies and the local housing market. That approach was influenced by how the first-line services understood the

challenge, and their motivations and capability to couple new local policies (stepped-up housing of refugees) with accessible and swift solutions.

How to explain increased ability to house refugees?

There were no new national housing policy tools to help the municipalities to solve the housing challenge, and the division of responsibilities between the Norwegian state and the municipalities remained the same as before the crisis. How did the increased local political willingness to settle refugees affect the problem-solving capacities of the municipalities, beyond exploring the possibilities in the incremental approach? The first question concerns what was different for the implementers before and after the crisis, and here we note the widespread attention and recognition of the crisis at all levels of society. Another important difference was the recognition that various levels of government would have to work together in handling the crisis, also regarding the municipalities' responsibility for settling more refugees who had been granted permission to stay. A third difference was the recognition that the scale of the crisis put pressure on alternative ways of solving the housing challenge, including attention to adapting the existing policy tools to the current situation.

Seen from the municipal employees' viewpoint, implementation was no longer a matter of how to house a given number of refugees in the municipality: it was part of a bigger project concerning how the first-line services could contribute and cooperate to solve the national refugee crisis. In line with conclusions derived from other studies (Berry & Berry, 2014; Christensen et al., 2016; Kingdon, 2014; Schneider & Ingram, 1990), we find that the crisis itself, the policy content and the attention paid to the work of first-liners all appear to have been strong motivating factors for municipal employees. There are also external factors that

can help to explain their surprising ability to double the settlement of refugees. These include the persistent soft pressure from the government (Ministry of Children and Equality, 2015a, b), intensified guidance from national actors (like the Directorate of Integration and Diversity, and the Norwegian State Housing Bank) to support municipal capacity building and learning about alternative policy tools and ways of accessing more housing—and, not least, the temporary slack in the private rental market (Søholt et al., 2018). Coupled with decentralization, internal factors such as the considerable degree of local autonomy in problem-solving activities, backing from own politicians and seniors as well as teamwork, supported the first-liners in exploring how to use existing policy-tools to increase settlement. Their efforts were further underpinned by their professional desire to do their job, and by their loyalty in following up political decisions—motivating them to find housing for incoming refugees.

> We are a people who like competition. If the municipal council decides to
> settle a certain number of refugees, we want to manage it—and we do!
> (Project interview, employee in first-line services, small municipality)

Schiller (2017) noted that a change in policy does not guarantee change in implementation. We do not contest that statement, but find that, independent of local decisions to increase the settlement of refugees, the crisis itself motivated employees in the first-line services to explore alternative ways of finding housing for refugees.

In the Norwegian system, based as it is on decentralization of responsibilities from politicians to administration regarding how to settle refugees, the problem-solving capacities of the first-line services are enhanced *because* the individual employee matters. The rather free-form process framed by political goals and norms about providing satisfactory housing for refugees

28

has promoted creativity, making the job meaningful (Kingdon, 2014). According to Schneider and Ingram (1990) and Berry and Berry (2014), implementers feel encouraged to find solutions when the task corresponds with their own motivations—as generally seems to be the case in our study. These findings on how decentralization and local autonomy can enhance crisis solutions at the municipal level make Norway an exceptional case by offering alternatives to central solutions and hierarchical control and governance in the context of the migration crisis.

Small or big changes?

We have argued that the municipalities managed to achieve greater settlement of refugees by adjusting their tool-kit through small, incremental steps. However, some municipalities achieved increases of 200% and more—hardly a "small" step. That could instead be seen as a considerable *policy change* as regards willingness to settle refugees, although the *solution* itself consisted of incremental steps. Such steps can be made quickly precisely because they are incremental and do not call for new political decisions.

According to Lindblom (1979, p. 517) "critics of incrementalism believe that doing better usually means turning away from incrementalism. Supporters of incrementalism believe that for complex problem solving it usually means practicing incrementalism more skillfully." In our case, policy tools like capacity building and learning aimed at influencing individual decision-making (Schneider & Ingram 1990) enhanced skillful incrementalism. The municipal success in handling the crisis is an argument in the Norwegian debate on why to maintain municipal autonomy in the housing of refugees, despite the previous gap between need and supply. Instead of political debates about changing the relations between state and

municipality through centralization the housing of refugees, the first-line services set about practicing their job more skillfully by using their tool-kit in flexible ways and by approaching the private rental market.

CONCLUSIONS

The refugee crisis affects the global, national and local levels. Once refugees have come to a country for resettlement, the national policy for inclusion/ exclusion of the newcomers influences local policy matters and choices. In welfare states with regulated entry restrictions, and where asylum-seekers must apply for asylum in order to become refugees with legal residency, the refugee question becomes local: refugees live in local communities, and are expected to become integrated. This "local turn" is enforced in welfare states with high levels of decentralization and municipally-provided welfare services that include legal refugees. This study of the Norwegian case provides further insights into the local dimension of migration policy-making and implementation in a crisis context in a decentralized and social democratic welfare regime. In Norway, where there is municipal autonomy in political *decisions* about resettlement of refugees, the greater willingness to receive refugees becomes part of local issues regarding future local development. Virtually all the municipalities in our study explained their change of policy in terms of a mix of solidarity and self-interest arguments, but there were urban/rural differences. The big cities focused more on solidarity arguments, whereas small, rural municipalities, many of them struggling with de-population, included the importance of population "refill."

Viewed from the outside, the refugee crisis led to limited policy changes in each municipality, apart from the willingness to settle more refugees. However, the collective local policy changes and changes in implementation through a bottom–up incrementalistic approach

30

resulted in major changes at the national level. The crisis affected local politicians and implementers independently, materializing in a new municipal mentality towards receiving refugees. Flexibility in looking for refugee housing where it was available, combined with the empathy for refugees among the population, not least among property-owners, seems to have enhanced the supply of housing for refugees.

Local responses to refugee settlement before the crisis had brought in a persistent gap in municipal refugee settlement. What changed in refugee settlement after 2015 concerns the crisis itself. A major finding in this study is that the crisis functioned as a window of opportunity, providing motivation for local politicians and employees alike. For the implementers, the crisis spurred engagement and capacity building to explore existing but financially improved policy tools and other alternative incremental ways. This resulted in a doubling of housing of refugees.

Norwegian municipalities responded to the crisis without coercive and hierarchical instructions from the central government. When there is agreement about the problem at hand, and considerable local autonomy in implementation together with local incrementalism and policy tools motivating the implementers, this comprehensive bottom–up strategy stands out as a feasible alternative to top–down, hierarchical modes of crisis management.

The refugee crisis underscored the interrelationship between the local, national, and global levels, showing that local responses to the global refugee crisis matter—despite the incomplete refugee governance at EU level found by other studies (Morsut & Kruke, 2018; Scipioni, 2018; Wolf & Ossewaarde, 2018). Further, the local-level management of the crisis helped to make the role of the municipalities more explicit as autonomous actors in questions of integration, with a tendency towards decoupling of policies between the local and the

national levels. Prior to the crisis, there had been reluctance to resettle and find housing for all refugees who had been granted permission to stay in Norway; after the crisis, some municipalities have even requested more refugees to settle, in essence contradicting the national policy of restricting the refugee influx.

Our study shows that the refugee crisis itself, combined with maintained municipal autonomy during the crisis, motivated local politicians' willingness and first-line services' ability to respond adequately to the demand for doubling local accommodation of refugees. The international refugee crisis became an opportunity to engage and manage the challenges on the local level. In that way, the Norwegian case is an example of how the local dimension of migration policymaking was followed by rather successful incremental implementation practices, enhanced by the considerable room of maneuver among the first-line services in finding local solutions for refugee housing.

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[i] Own calculations based on data from Statistics Norway, 2018.

[ii] "Social housing" refers to dwellings owned by the municipality and dwellings at the disposal of the municipality, sublet to refugees or others.

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Table 1: Number of new municipal dwellings receiving grants or loans from the Norwegian State Housing Bank in the years 2014, 2015 and 2016.

Number of dwellings receiving:	New social housing with grants and/or loans		
	2014	**2015**	**2016**
Grants	1166	1753	1994
Loans	317	619	569

Source: The Norwegian State Housing Bank. Annual report 2016.

Table 2: First-time settlement of refugees in 2014, 2015, 2016 in social and private rental dwellings. Total number (N) and per cent (%).

Landlord:	2014		2015		2016		Increase 2014-2016
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Municipality	2 680	35	3 646	32	4 393	29	64%
Private, incl. self-settlement	4 992	65	7 622	68	10 828	71	117%
Total	7 672	100	11 268	100	15 221	100	

Own calculations based on data Statistics Norway (Kostra) and IMDi Statistics.
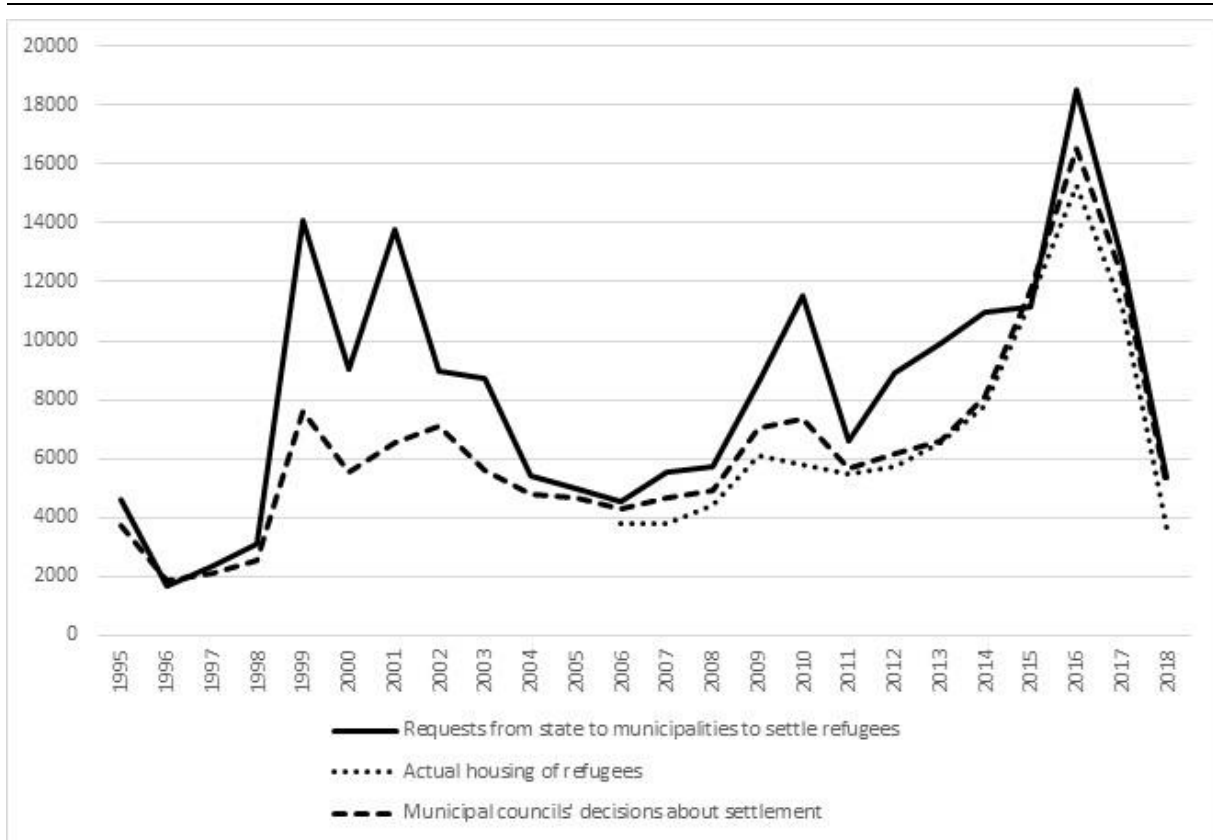
Figure 1: Changes in settlements of refugees 1995 – 2018 (actual housing 2012 – 2018).

Figure 2: What do you think motivated your municipality to receive and settle refugees between 2014 and 2016? Choose the three statements you find most important. Distribution in per cent. Dark colour: Solidarity arguments. Light colour: Self-interest arguments.