REFUGEE POLICY AND LOCAL DECISION MAKING: COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES FROM SWEDEN

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Abstract

Migration flows are frequent topics of research in different disciplines. Focusing on the Swedish municipality level, we complement such earlier studies’ macro perspective with an intensive examination of how a few Swedish municipalities design their local refugee policy and thereby either accept or do not accept refugees. Combining this local perspective with micro theory, we derive from rationalistic premises of how political leaders and bureaucrats act to maximize their interests. By selecting municipalities that share several important characteristics except their attitude towards the reception of refugees, we can, through analyzing interviews and documents, show how a pragmatic view and internal constraints often shape local decision making in terms of outlining refugee policy. Doing this makes it possible to connect the actors’ behavior with structures forming the society and the municipality’s organization in which they are embedded.

Keywords: rational choice, local migration policy, local politics, refugees.

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Introduction

In several earlier studies (Hatton 2004; Facchini and Mayda 2008; Segal, Elliott, and Mayadas 2010), international flows of migration, including asylum seekers and refugees, have been examined. The results from these studies point to the importance of several structural explanations that determine nations or local societies that welcome the inflow of these exposed groups. These factors have had different theoretical backgrounds, such as economic, demographical, cultural, or political (e.g. Hatton 2004; Massey 1990; Facchini and Mayda 2008; Facchini, Mayda, and Mishra 2011). However, such studies have not proven to be fully sufficient, and are characterized by a macro perspective that risks missing out the action taken by concerned stakeholders. Since the mandate to decide upon these questions in a liberal democracy is possessed by elected politicians, research concludes that the political will is the dominating factor in regulating migration policy (Freeman 1994; Czaika and de Haas 2011). In federal and decentralized unitary states, these matters can often be a decision for the regional or even the local level, and on an administrative level they also include public officials as potentially important actors. Besides some recent exceptions in relation to structural approaches (Lidén and Nyhlén 2012; Caponio and Borkert 2010; Steen 2009), the local level has been neglected in explanatory studies. To achieve valid inquiries of causal chains leading to a specific migration policy, structural perspectives should, though, be complemented with intensive micro studies, making it possible to reconstruct decision-making processes of how such decisions are brought about.

In this study we will examine how decisions concerning the acceptance of refugees are reached in a few Swedish municipalities and simultaneously connect such evidence with results from earlier structurally oriented studies. In Sweden, the local municipalities themselves decide whether they would like to receive refugees and, if so, how many they would like to receive each year. On that matter they are sovereign. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explain the standpoint of Swedish municipalities in relation to the reception of refugees. Following from this, an associated research question that will guide the article is: What are the motives for receiving or not receiving refugees in the investigated municipalities? When we approach this question, we will derive from rationalistic premises about how political leaders and bureaucrats would act to satisfy their interests. In line with earlier research in the field of migration studies (Massey et al. 1993; Arango 2000), we argue that it is reasonable to apply a micro perspective of individual actions, but instead of placing the focus on the individual who has to decide whether or not to migrate, we make inquiries of the political actors and their administration that determine, presumably based on rational motives, whether or not they will accept refugees.

In the following sections we will outline the Swedish case and the theoretical arguments. Thereafter we state our research design, and describe the selection of cases and the method for analysis. In the last section of this article, the empirical findings are presented, followed by the comparison of the cases and the conclusions. The results show that what is rational concerning the reception of refugees varies among the municipalities. This is due both to conditions and to different attitudes.

The Swedish case

There are several explanations as to why it is important to focus on Swedish municipalities’ reception of refugees. One reason is that in international comparisons, Sweden receives many refugees in proportion to its population size (UNHCR 2011). As already argued, there are also important reasons for examining the local level. The first explanation simply has to do with the crucial role played by the municipalities in the reception of refugees. Together with the Swedish Migration Board, they are mainly responsible. More specifically the municipalities, through agreements with the Migration Board, agree to accept a certain number of refugees each year. Another reason has to do with the fact

1 Common to all the individuals in this wide category is that they have obtained a residence permit. In other words, this group of people represents a legal form of migration and those who presumably intend to stay in permanently in Sweden (King 2002). We thereby exclude the wide category of asylum seekers in this inquiry.
that not much of the research has examined why municipalities receive refugees at all and to what extent they do so. Among the Swedish case studies (e.g. Qvist 2008; Qvist 2012; Soininen 1992; Kadhim 2000), the focus has not been on explaining the decision process that has caused the reception of refugees, but rather on the introduction and integration of this group. In addition, various forms of collaboration between municipalities and other actors have been studied. Among others, Emilsson and Hagström (2009) have investigated the residential social consequences of migration legislation in the municipalities of Malmö and Södertälje. However, this article examines the preceding phase, namely, what explains that municipalities whatsoever receive refugees, associated with the decision-making process.

Looking at the recent situation, data from the Swedish Migration Board (2010) for the years 2006–2010 shows that almost 92 percent of the municipalities had an agreement with the Board to receive refugees. However, commitment varies considerably, with an annual average of 74 places among municipalities with agreements.

Understanding the attitudes of municipalities

In relation to this aspect, In this case, and deriving from assumptions of rational actors, a few issues need to be discussed as a basis for a theoretical valid framework. First, to be able to apply a theoretical understanding of how actors make decisions in the area of refugee policy, we derive from a general proposition of rationality, with the logic of Homans (1974): an actor will choose the action that, based on the value and probability, gives him the greatest result. Additional elements in this equation are founded on the desires and the beliefs of the actors as well as on the information that is provided or the balance while investing resources in gathering information (Elster 2007; Hedström and Swedberg 1996). Moreover, and as stressed by Coleman (1990), structures also affect actions, irrespective of whether they are formal, such as laws or institutions, or abstract, such as cultures, norms, and values. As elegantly put by Elster (2007, 183): ‘explanation of behavior is [often] found in the situation rather than in the person.’

Being aware of the considerable and often legitimate criticism of rational choice theory, based on both analytical flaws (e.g. Tilly 1997) as well as empirical constraints (e.g. Green and Shapiro 1996), we still find that applying this theory as assumptions of decision making is reasonable. At least, our claim is that this approach is most suitable when linking structural conditions to individual actions. Furthermore, studying the creation of decisions as an outcome of a policy process makes it necessary to take the organizational structure into account. More concretely, individuals’ actions are not only influenced by the macro structure in society but also by the culture and resources provided by the organizations in which they are embedded (cf. Nyhlin and Lidén 2011). Structural conditions can hence be regarded as multilayered. Nor is political decision making usually an individual process. The policy issue in this case potentially involves several actors, resulting in a policy creation that is collective. Although collective action can be regarded from a positive (Ostrom 1990) or a more gloomy view (Olson 1965), the intensive approach of this study will make it possible to examine the outcomes of such processes by allowing a careful look at different actors and their collective outcome.

In theories explaining individual action, an important distinction is made between politicians and public officials. The desires and beliefs, resources and information are assumed to differ between these different types of actors, creating different possible outcomes in the form of actions. As argued by Downs (1957), it is rational for a politician to yield maximum benefits for his constituents; deriving from the case of local migration policy, one could hypothesize that the policy advocated by the local political leader would reflect the attitudes towards immigrants that is shared among the dominant section of the voters. Turning to public officials, a key conclusion in significant research has been that public officials have a considerable influence on the outcome of a political system (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Hjern and Porter 1981; Lipsky 1980). There are several reasons for highlighting the

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2 Italics from the original quote.
part of public officials. One reason has already been mentioned, namely the importance of public officials in the implementation of democratic decisions. Another reason is that public officials and their influence in the policy process has not been studied to any significant extent, neither in Sweden nor abroad (Bengtsson 2012). This is especially true when it comes to local politics. According to Pierre (1994) and Baldersheim (2000), there are few Swedish and Nordic studies focusing on the role of public officials in decision making in local politics. The same reflections have also been made in more contemporary research (Högberg 2007; Jacobsen 2007). The assumptions about the actions of these actors are, however, not conclusive definite. Not so controversial is the assumption that public officials will behave rationally and thereby use sufficient means to reach the objectives that are set form them (Lynn, Jr. 2007) Perhaps the statements of Niskanen (1971), that officials will budget maximize the public administration, or those of Lipsky (1980), that street-level bureaucrats outline their work to become as easy and routine as possible, are more contentious, but they are, at the same time, based on reasonable, rationalistic assumptions. To nuance this perspective, Bengtsson (2012), from a review of research in the field, identifies three ideal types of public officials. The opponent is characterized by having different preferences from politicians and thereby exercises power in a way that meets their own or certain groups’ preferences (Peters 1987; Downs 1957; March and Olsen 1989; Tahvilzadeh 2012; Bengtsson 2012). The team player is characterized by being loyal to the politicians and exercising influence by meeting the preferences of the politicians. Such public officials are truly impartial and competent (Svara 2006; Bengtsson 2012). The third ideal type is the hybrid. This type of public official is characterized by being both public official and politician at the same time. The hybrid has expert knowledge and a potentially big influence, and is loyal both to their profession and to the authority of politicians (Bengtsson 2012). The literature that examines the relationship between politicians and public officials notes that they are both, at the same time, collectively involved in policymaking. Goodin (1982) states that key actors, both representing leading politicians and leading public officials, form an exclusive group to outline substantive policy outcome. This oligopoly, held together by trust and information that is kept internal, will work to enforce the mutually agreed desires and beliefs of the included actors.

So far, we have argued that it is legitimate to assume a rationalistic perspective when trying to explain how municipalities act in relation to the reception of refugees. We have, at the same time, stressed the importance of regarding decision making as an often collective process, and by discussing different actors in the organization of a municipality, we have shown how rationality can differ because of a variation in desires, beliefs, and information, but also because of position. Reaching assumptions on an organizational level is, though, not without constraints. By deriving from the typology of Steen (2010), we show how different choices in local migration policy can be regarded as rational (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Standpoints on reception of refugees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument</th>
<th>Symbolic</th>
<th>Instrumental</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xenophobia</td>
<td>Welfare loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settlemnt attitude</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Welfare gain</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solidarity</td>
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</table>

A negative standpoint on the reception of refugees

The first reason for having no or a limited reception of refugees is rational only from a xenophobic line of argument. Different causes can be put forward, but they are seldom founded on scientific evidence, and scholars (Rydgren 2004) have shown how xenophobic beliefs are not subjectively rational. However, if such movements are present and dominate the local agenda, it could be rational for the
local political leadership to minimize the inflow of immigrants and thereby, *ceteris paribus*, increase their chances of continued political support. Minkenberg (2001) has shown how the influence of radical-right ideas can either be direct, through participation in the formation of legislation, or more indirect. Moreover, either this pressure can be supported by top public officials or these officials can simply be fully loyal. A situation in which a weak political leadership is opposed by strong public officials is more unreasonable, because the latter could block the reception of refugees owing to a xenophobic agenda.

Because of instrumental arguments, municipalities could minimize their reception by reasoning about *welfare loss*. Consequences of this character could be direct and more secondary. Pressure on the municipality’s budget as a result of a level of state subsidy that is too low, as well as a shortage of housing are direct consequences, while increasing levels of unemployment and social commitments can be defined as secondary. Due to lower levels of employment rates and higher levels of receipt of means-tested social security payments among foreign-born individuals (Schierup, Hansen, and Castles 2006), the reception of refugees can put a lot of pressure on local societies. For local politicians and public officials, a negative standpoint based on instrumental arguments is often motivated with reference to a strained budget in relation to which prioritizations are needed. Such claims can often gain support if they build upon a scenario of how cutbacks on, for example, education or elder care would affect the community.

**A positive standpoint on the reception of refugees**

One form of argument for the acceptance of refugees is drawn from an idea of *solidarity*. From a Swedish perspective, this could be a current reason, since citizens’ attitudes towards refugees have developed to be more positive than in comparable countries (Demker 2007). As Steen argues (2010, 202), this attitude can be dependent on loyalty to the central government, as well as sympathy for the exposed group in question. From a political perspective, this standpoint can also be rational by alluding to the solidarity of the local citizens and thereby reinforcing political support. Public officials can also take this stance and thereby directly or more indirectly influence the outcome of the local policy. Abiri (2000) has shown how generosity was the trademark of Swedish refugee policy for a long time, but how a more restricted view was established during the 1990s.

The reception of refugees can also be regarded as a *welfare gain* in society. Such effects can be about reacting to a shortage of labor or handling a skewed age pyramid. An inflow of immigrants can, in that sense, be a way to improve the conditions for local development. If a state subsidy is generous and leads to a surplus, an acceptance of refugees could, in addition, be a way to finance investments in other areas of the municipal sector. In Sweden, the municipalities with agreements are entitled to economic compensation from the state (SFS: 2010, 1122). The municipalities that have agreed to accept refugees receive a basic allowance each year, irrespective of the received number. For 2012, the compensation is S. kr. 440 000, although that is almost 20 percent lower than in previous years. In addition, the municipalities receive standard funding for each individual, but this is based on the person’s needs, e.g. compensation for training, interpreting, health care and other support efforts (SFS: 2010, 1122).

**Research design and method**

Four municipalities will be examined and, deriving from methodological discussions on how to select cases from cross-sectional studies (Gerring 2007), the municipalities of Rättvik, Bräcke, Ånge, and Dorotea were chosen. Since the ambition of the study is to examine the process that leads to a choice of either accepting or not accepting refugees, the selection of cases resembles the logic from the most similar systems design (Anckar 2008). More concretely, the selected municipalities were chosen because they are as similar as possible regarding potential influencing factors, except when it comes to the phenomenon of interest in the reception of refugees, where they vary. Using this design, many of the structural variables that could influence the attitude towards reception can be kept constant, and
this assists in controlling for extraneous variation (Peters 1998). Table 1 presents some of the results from earlier research on local societies’ reception of refugees (Lidén and Nyhlén 2012).

The table presents the selected variables as either below or above the Swedish national average. Apart from the difference in the level of reception of refugees, in that two municipalities have a higher reception level than the national average and two a lower, the four municipalities are in many ways similar. To be more specific, they have higher unemployment rates and a higher average age than the average of other Swedish municipalities. By contrast, these municipalities indicate lower levels of income and variation in the distribution of income (Gini coefficient), and are also small. What this compilation underlines is that the willingness to receive refugees cannot, among these four cases, be explained by traditional structural conditions that have shown importance elsewhere (Lidén and Nyhlén 2012; Steen 2009). Therefore a more intensive approach is especially appropriate.

Table 1: Comparison of Cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reception of refugees</th>
<th>Unemployment rate</th>
<th>Average income</th>
<th>Gini coefficient</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Average age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dorotea</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bräcke</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ånge</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rättvik</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
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</table>

Data collection

To achieve the purpose of this research, this study is based on both interviews and a study of documents. The interviews were conducted during the spring and fall of 2012, and were held with both administrators and politicians responsible for the reception of refugees in the four municipalities. The collected data refers to a situation mainly representing the last five years of the reception of refugees. Contact with respondents was made by email or by phone, and an appointment for the interviews was agreed. The quotes that appear in the text are reproduced verbatim, except for editorial changes to some quotes to make them easier to read and some adjustments to allow for the transition from spoken language to written language.

In the interviews, the semistructured interview method was used, which means that the questions are predetermined, but that there is an opportunity to ask supplementary questions about anything in the answer that is unclear. During the interviews, an interview guide was used in which the questions were based on a number of key topics. These were used as a unifying link in the interviews, and they facilitated the compilation and analysis of the material. The interview guide also gave the interviewer the opportunity to ask supplementary questions if there were any ambiguities (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 2003). In the empirical extraction, we have attempted to use quotes that reflect the width and depth of the material. The people quoted are those whom we feel best capture the aspects that need to be illuminated. By using this method, we hope to capture the dynamics of the material that the interviews gave rise to (see Schmauch 2006).

To complement the interviews, document studies have been used. The studied documents are the those that formed the basis for local decisions on the issue of refugees. The document study has provided important background information and allowed data triangulation (Gerring 2007). We need to follow up this result and sis so in the interviews.

Results

In this section we will present the empirical material that is related to each of the four municipalities.

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3 For information about this data see Lidén and Nyhlén (2012).
Ånge

The municipality of Ånge, located in the geographical middle of Sweden, is today best characterized as a society in which both a public service and a private service sector are present, complemented with a few chemical industries that represent the area’s previous history as an industrial community. Although, historically, Ånge began as a community around a railway junction, today it faces the same problems as many other small municipalities in northern Sweden: the challenges of a declining population and an undifferentiated, shrinking economy.

In 2006 Ånge agreed to receive as many as 40 refugees, a considerable number for a municipality with only about 10,000 citizens (Ånge Kommun 2006). However, this was found to be an exceptional year, and when it was time to reach a new agreement with the Swedish Migration Board, via the county administrative board, this number was halved. A later proposal from the government about an increase in reception has not resulted in this number increasing. This agreement was extended until 2012, and still includes a commitment of 20 refugees a year. This level of reception is, as already indicated, lower than expected, on the basis of the average levels of all municipalities, and is also lower than the Swedish Migration Board’s plan of distributing a certain number of refugees into local communities in Sweden.

Since the structural conditions that have been discussed cannot explain this somewhat surprising outcome, one has to turn to other explanations. In the protocols of the Municipal Executive Board that handled this issue in 2007, the head of the administration concerned suggested that Ånge should return to a lower level of reception of refugees, for reasons to do with capacity (Ånge Kommun 2007). During an interview with this person in 2012, he elaborates upon this downgrade. Two main reasons are put forward. A reception of more than 20 refugees requires a more developed organization to maintain quality, indicating that new appointments could then be necessary. In addition, the head of the development department points out that the labor market in Ånge would not be able to handle levels of job seekers that were very high (Wallsten 2012). The opinions put forward by the local councilor, a Social Democrat, point in the same direction. He argues that a reception of 20 refugees yearly is manageable, but that if that figure is exceeded then a much larger commitment is necessary. Moreover, the local councilor states that one of the motives for receiving refugees is solidarity, both in relation to the exposed individuals but also in relation to other municipalities in Sweden, meaning that Ånge must also contribute. For a few years Ånge has also had a limited reception of unaccompanied minors. The local councilor clearly expresses how a reception of the incoming children provides several advantages in relation to the (often older) quota refugees. First of all, this type of reception is more fully financed by the government, sometimes even resulting in a surplus, and thereby increasing the municipality’s potential to offer employment. Second, minors are, to a greater extent, regarded as a resource in the local society. Reasoning of this kind suggests that something of a hierarchy among different groups of immigrants could exist from the perspective of local societies (Danielsson 2012).

Ultimately, this is a political question, and one therefore wonders whether any disagreement has taken place among the parties in the local council. Interviews do, however, indicate that something of a consensus has been the case in this matter. No diverging opinions are said to influence the policymaking on this issue. The person in charge of these matters in the administration describes the renewal of the agreement as an uncomplicated and pragmatic process. Described as the outcome of almost a personal agreement between the head of the administration and the local councilor, the terms of the renewal are then decided upon, normally without any opposition, by the executive board and later by the local council of Ånge (Westin 2012). During recent years, however, the new anti-immigration party in the council has tried to disturb this unproblematic process. In a proposal from early 2012 from the only representative of the Swedish Democrats in the council, an abolition of Ånge’s agreement with the Swedish Migration Board was put forward (Ånge Kommun 2012). It is hard to not look upon this as anything other than a suggestion that goes way beyond the broad
political consensus in this matter. In the long run it is hard to interpret the eventual effect of proposals of this kind.

To conclude, the reasons for an annual reception of 20 refugees in Ånge originate from a few more convincing factors. The size of the municipality’s administrative body and the condition of the local labor market can be regarded as convincing elements supporting the relevant arguments, but even more interesting is the question that has arisen of whether the municipality has its own prioritization of different groups of immigrants. Since an increasing focus on unaccompanied minors is argued for, on the basis of both economic and strategic reasons, one could expect that it is not only thoughts of solidarity that are decisive. Finally, the existence of the Swedish Democrats in the local council is another aspect that could, at least in the future, play a more influential role in the outlining of the refugee policy, on the assumption that they keep their place in the local democracy.

**Bräcke**

The municipality of Bräcke belongs to the group that includes the less-populated municipalities in Sweden. About 7000 inhabitants live in this wooded district, where the forest industry is the main employer and dominates local business. Positioned in the middle of Sweden, and also in the interior part of the country, Bräcke has to face the problems of an aging population, because a considerable proportion of younger people move out.

Even though Bräcke has had a long experience of the reception of refugees, we initiate this inquiry by referring to the agreement from 2002 to 2005 that specified that the municipality agreed to receive 30 individuals each year (Bräcke kommun 2002). This agreement was renegotiated in 2006. The process began with a proposal from the Migration Board that the number of places should be increased to 34. Arguing in support of this, the Migration Board emphasized the conditions of the government ordinance that would give extra compensation to the municipality for every new agreed place (Bräcke kommun 2006). Following this, there was another increase in reception numbers, and since 2010 Bräcke has agreed to receive 45 refugees annually (Bräcke kommun 2010).4

From our analysis of documents and interviews, a pattern is revealed of the reasons for this expansion. As stated by the Social Democratic deputy leader of the local council: “There is no political discussion about the numbers … [those are based on] inquiries from the authorities” (Persson 2012). This picture is verified by the head of the international office, who does not think that the local politicians would oppose suggestions or pleas from the Swedish Migration Board regarding refugee reception (Antman 2012). The actions of the municipality must, though, also be understood to stem from other motives as well. The deputy leader of the local council emphasizes that a tradition of receiving refugees has been established for a long time and, in combination with other categories of incoming immigrants, the local society has developed and become quite multicultural. Nor have any reasons arisen for reconsidering this approach (Persson 2012). It was implied by some respondents, and by others more explicitly formulated, that humanitarian motives prevail and function as some kind of background purpose for accepting refugees. Politically, this is a process that is described as unproblematic and without any dividing opinions between parties.

That Bräcke has a yearly reception of 45 refugees gives rise to questions about what a small municipality can manage. Interviews with both politicians and public officials indicate that an even bigger commitment is not reasonable, based on the present situation. It would demand a larger organization and accessible and free apartments (Perez 2012), but would still be challenging for such a small local society. Even if there have not been any clashes due to this immigration, the deputy leader of the local council cautions against a situation in which integration of refugees could be harder (Persson 2012).

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4 Since 2010 the municipality has also received unaccompanied minors, and when individuals in this group come of age and receive a residence permit, they are included in the total sum of a reception of 45 refugees annually.
Summing up, the reason for Bräcke’s standpoint on the issue of refugees, a historical background, needs to be a part of an understanding of that standpoint. A municipality that has received refugees for a long time must clearly redefine the influence of cultural and political traits for questioning this decision. Humanitarian motives are the main principles in this case. On a more pragmatic level, this is expressed through a high degree of solidarity. It is outlined through a genuine will to help exposed groups, but also to assist the national government. Such a municipality follows the recommendations and requests of the state, even if the local society is sovereign in deciding on this matter.

**Dorotea**

Together with a handful of municipalities in the county of Västerbotten, Dorotea is one of the most sparsely populated municipalities in Sweden, with fewer than 3000 inhabitants. It has some specialized manufacturing industries and, together with the tourism sector, a fairly well-developed business sector, but it does suffer because of an aging and declining population.

In relation to its small size, Dorotea has one of the largest receptions of refugees in Sweden, meaning a yearly commitment of between 30 and 40 individuals. One might wonder how a small municipality in the north of Sweden has a reception of refugees that, in relation to the average, is more than five times larger than could be expected. Interviews with both politicians and public officials give some clues to this situation. In the literature it is theorized that one motive for receiving refugees is that it could give a welcome inflow to the municipality’s budget (Steen 2010). This does, however, not seem to be applicable in Dorotea. The respondents agree that the state subsidy today is not sufficient and that, in fact, the reception causes extra pressure on an already limited budget (Skoog 2012). Instead, another reason seems to be dominant, namely that the reception of refugees is a way to counterbalance demographic development and to ensure inflow to the local labor market. As the social democratic local councilor honestly acknowledges: “This is the fastest way to stabilize and to try to stop [the negative demographic development]” (Lindqvist 2012). Labeled as something of a salvation for the extremely sparsely populated areas in the north of Sweden, one of the public officials notes that a reception of large numbers of refugees has deliberately become a chosen and quite rational strategy (Tegnander 2012). The level of reception needs to be balanced, though. Even if Dorotea already has and will continue to have a demand for labor, especially in the public welfare sector, the local labor market is very limited and geographically positioned such that commuting to a larger labor market is not possible.

Besides questioning the motives, the level of reception and the attitude towards it were scrutinized. Regarding the present situation, representatives of the municipality argue that a reception of the current magnitude is more or less what Dorotea can manage. The head administrator reveals that her message to the politicians is that a higher number would be too challenging. Reasons for this judgment are that a high figure would risk reducing the quality of the reception as well as integration (Skoog 2012). At the same time, the municipality notices a demand from the county council to increase its reception numbers, and attitudes towards this diverge. The public officials cannot, in this matter, be characterized as “budget maximizers” (cf. Niskanen 1971) since they care more about achieving quality than increasing the level of reception. From political perspectives, a more positive attitude can be traced, but the limited labor market is presented as a constraint. Moreover, it could be expected that there would be a local opinion against accepting too many refugees in a society that already includes challenging conditions. Unanimous answers in the interviews do, however, point to a situation in which refugees are mostly welcomed by the local citizens.

Concluding the discussion of Dorotea, there seems to be one dominating reason why the municipality settles on a level of reception that is this high. Evidence from the interviews cannot be interpreted in any other way than that receiving refugees is considered as a way to hinder, or at least to minimize, the negative demographic trend. In the long run, this could be one way for a local society of this character to survive both by maintaining a minimal level of population and by providing for the local labor market. It is not emphasized in the interviews that accepting refugees is done because of
humanitarian reasons or reasons relating to solidarity. Rather, this municipality clearly sees refugees as primarily a resource, and by settling on a high level of reception it clutches at straws for its own survival.

Rättvik

The municipality of Rättvik is located in the county of Dalarna, and has fewer than 11,000 inhabitants. Rättvik is characterized by being a forested and agricultural district, and is the northernmost municipality in Sweden that does not receive refugees. The municipality does not receive asylum seekers either, but over the last few years it has accepted unaccompanied minors. Reception in recent years has been about 8 or 9 children, but the number of places agreed by the municipality for unaccompanied minors is 12.

The main reason why the municipality does not receive refugees is that there is a shortage of housing in the municipality. According to the local councilor, this means that the municipality has difficulties in offering young people, born and raised in the municipality, an apartment. Today, the young people from Rättvik seek housing in other, surrounding, municipalities. The municipality also has a problem offering the elderly who want to leave their farms and villas apartments. This means that Rättvik did not dare to accept any refugees (Riesbeck 2012). The local councilor puts it this way: “We do not have the capacity to offer these people [the refugees] housing and the housing situation in the municipality is really tough” (Riesbeck 2012). This picture is confirmed by one of the public officials who was interviewed (Estvind 2012). The shortage of housing leads to long waiting lists to get an apartment, and Rättvik is the municipality that has the greatest influx of people in Dalarna. One might think that building new houses is an option, but because of the cost associated with this, it is not really an alternative for the municipality (Bergvik 2012).

At the same time, there is pressure on the municipality, from both the county administration and the surrounding municipalities, to receive refugees (Riesbeck 2012). There are also indications, in the empirical material, that there are some political differences concerning the question of receiving refugees. Some of the political parties in the municipal assembly have had their doubts about receiving refugees.

Rättvik is a municipality that, like other sparsely populated municipalities, has a relatively high average age. Against this background, the municipal officials have frequently presented proposals for the municipality to receive adult refugees. The present proposal discusses accommodating about 30 refugees (Estvind 2012). If this were to become a reality, it would require the municipality to solve the housing problem, which would involve building new houses and increasing cooperation with other municipalities. The shortage of housing is also what makes the municipality cautious regarding the establishment of receiving adult refugees.

Concluding the discussion of Rättvik, it seems clear that the main reason why the municipality does not receive refugees is because of the housing situation. The interviews indicated that it is hard for the municipalities to provide apartments for young people and older people who want to move. This problem must be resolved if the municipality is to receive refugees in the future. Meanwhile, a proposal by officials of the municipality is being developed to start the reception of refugees to come to terms with the skewed age structure of the municipality.

Comparing and analyzing cases

In this section we will compare the cases using the typology developed by Steen (2010) that was presented earlier. The interviews revealed a range of arguments from the municipalities as to why they receive or do not receive refugees.

In Ånge, the administrative organization of the municipality and the local labor market are the central factors supporting the arguments for the relatively low number of refugees received. The key reasons concerning the organization relate to the fact that there is only a small number of public officials who
work on the reception of refugees. This means that the municipality is only capable of receiving a certain number of refugees under the existing organization. If more refugees are to be received, it needs to expand. Another argument put forward is the size of the labor market. The labor market in Ånge is small and can only handle a small number of job seekers, which also limits the municipality’s potential to receive a higher number of refugees. The policy process regarding these matters is characterized by consensus between the political parties and politicians, and the public officials.

Bräcke is characterized by its long tradition of accepting refugees, who have gone on to contribute to the development of Bräcke into a multicultural municipality. In this case, the key arguments for receiving 45 refugees are humanitarian and solidarity. This is reflected in the fact that the municipality receives the number of refugees that the County Administrative Board asks for. By contrast, the dominating argument in Dorotea is that the reception of refugees is a way for the municipality to try to hinder or minimize the negative demographic trend and to provide the local labor market with personnel. In Dorotea, the refugees are seen primarily as a resource for the local society and its labor market.

The deviant case in this study is Rättvik, because of its lack of reception. In Rättvik, the interviews show that the dominating argument for not receiving any refugees is because of the housing situation in the municipality. The municipality has a problem with providing apartments for both younger and older people, which makes it difficult for the municipality to receive refugees.

Returning to Steen (2010) and the model presented earlier, the categorization of the cases could be, based on the empirical findings, set out as in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 Categorization of the cases: empirical findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument</th>
<th>Symbolic</th>
<th>Instrumental</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Bräcke</td>
<td>Ånge, Rättvik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dorotea</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both Ånge and Rättvik are characterized as being negative and having instrumental arguments for their standpoint. In the case of Ånge, the size of its organization and the size of its labor market are central arguments in the municipality’s standpoint. According to Niskanen (1971), every bureaucracy tries to maximize their budget. However, in Ånge this seems not to be the case, because the public officials do not try to influence the politicians to receive more refugees so that the administration can expand. The assumption of Lipsky (1980) seems to be more appropriate, namely that the public officials want their work to be as easy and routine as possible. Another key argument in Ånge was the size of the labor market. The labor market can handle a certain number of refugees, and if the municipality wants to receive more refugees then the number of unemployed would increase, creating welfare loss for the municipality. Another factor that could affect Ånge’s will to receive refugees is the presentation of an anti-immigrant party, the Swedish Democrats, in the municipal assembly. In a proposal in 2012 in the assembly, the Swedish Democrats suggested that Ånge should abolish its agreement with the Migration Board. It is hard to see what the effects of this suggestion will be in the long run; on the other hand, it cannot be excluded that these kinds of proposal could have short-term effects. In Rättvik, on the other hand, the argument housing problems plays an important role. The municipality has a shortage of apartments, and building new ones needs financing and political changes in priorities. In the short run, changes in priorities could lead to welfare loss for the municipality. In Rättvik, the public officials seem to play an important role in order to make Rättvik receive refugees. The public official adopts a role as the opponent as a way of improving the refugees’ situation as a group and their position in society (Bengtsson 2012; Tahvilzadeh 2012).
Bräcke is categorized as positive, and in the model the arguments are of symbolic character. In Bräcke, the solidarity argument is the most prominent. The respondents interviewed point to the importance of the municipality giving the refugees a place to live. This is also shown in the fact that the municipality accepts the suggested numbers of refugees set by the County Administrative Board. The municipality is solidaric in relation to both the exposed group and the government. In Dorotea, on the other hand, the most prominent arguments are instrumental. The reason why the municipality has, in relation to its population size, a large reception of refugees is due to likely welfare gains. The picture that is revealed is that the municipality sees the refugees as a potential work force and a resource for the municipality, even though it knows that the compensation from the government is set to decrease. The positive effect is thus calculated in the long run and does not include support from the government.

Conclusions

The research question that has guided the study is What are the motives for receiving or not receiving refugees in the investigated municipalities? The motives, derived from Steen (2010), are divided into two main categories: settlement attitudes and argument. Within settlement attitudes we find the subcategories negative and positive, and within the arguments we find the subcategories symbolic and instrumental. It could be concluded that three out of these four dimensions are relevant to the municipalities that we have studied. Both Ånge and Rättvik are categorized as negative, and their arguments are instrumental, but in different ways. In Ånge, the most prominent arguments concern the size of the municipal organization and the size of the labor market. The first argument contradicts Niskanen’s (1971) view on public administration as a budget maximizer. The second argument, the size of the labor market, corresponds to the fear that the municipality would risk welfare loss if it increased its reception of refugees, because of the risk of having problems with increased levels of unemployment. In Rättvik, also categorized as negative and instrumental, the key arguments concern the housing problem in the municipality. The municipality has a shortage of apartments, which affects its potential to receive refugees. The public officials seem to play an important role in changing the direction of the policy in Rättvik. Their action corresponds to the arguments put forward by Tahvilzadeh (2012), who argues that public officials could act as advocates for certain groups in society. Bräcke is characterized as positive, and the arguments are symbolic in character. The data shows that solidarity is the main reason why Bräcke receives refugees. The respondents point to the importance of the municipality helping the refugees and giving them a place to live. In Dorotea, the arguments are instrumental in terms of welfare gains. The municipality argues that the refugees are the municipality’s opportunity to supply the labor market with a workforce.

To conclude, the picture revealed in this study shows that the municipalities, because of their differences, have different rational arguments for or against the reception of refugees (Coleman 1990). One way to see this is that for two of the municipalities, Rättvik and Ånge, the most rational way to act is to be more restricted in their reception because of their specific circumstances: a housing problem and both the size of the administration handling refugee matters and the size of the labor market respectively (Homans 1974).

One way to obtain welfare gains is to invest. Rättvik could invest in housing and Ånge, in business promoting activities. For Dorotea, it is rational to receive as many refugees as possible, because of its demographical situation and as a resource for the labor market. Dorotea is a small municipality, sparsely populated, and with an inverted demographical pyramid. For Dorotea, the reception of refugees is a way of obtaining welfare gain and counteract the emigration from the municipality. For Bräcke, as a multicultural municipality, it could be seen as rational to proceed with the reception, because multiculturalism increases the chances that the refugees will settle there permanently in Bräcke. If the municipality were to reduce the number of refugees to be received, then others of foreign origin would start to move out of the municipality. The theoretical contribution of this study is
to show that rationality and the organizational structure (Coleman 1990) are clearly affected by the situation (Elster 2007) which is proved by the different standpoint of the municipalities.
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